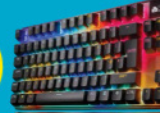


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ISSUE 409

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

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"THIS IS A THRILLING, BLOODY EXPERIENCE NO GAMER SHOULD MISS"



The original *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* was a landmark game in the history of PC gaming, despite famously launching in a broken, buggy state. As an RPG, though, it was intoxicating, welcoming you into a dark, complex world of supernatural beings that not only let you play it your way, but pulled no punches in its adult themes and mature tone.

ROBERT JONESTwitter
@rnicolasj**This month**

Was found cloistered deep in the shadows of a dark den of iniquity, his mouth speckled with a viscous red liquid. We've told him before about smuggling raspberry Slush Puppies into Wetherspoons.

And now *The Chinese Room* is beckoning us back into the *World of Darkness* once more with *Bloodlines 2*. And, from what we've played in our world exclusive fangs-on, this is a thrilling, bloody experience that no gamer should miss.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**MOLLIE TAYLOR**Twitter
@mollietay**This month**

Decided to live her life at double speed. The result? Just missed out on buying a MSRP 9070 XT quicker.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter
@robinvalentine**This month**

Went around with a flamethrower burning all yellow sticky notes. Oh, and in *Firebreak* he...

**IAN EVENDEN**Bluesky
@ianev.bsky.social**This month**

Sneezed on PC Gamer Towers' mighty leader, Peeceecat. Got put on litter box cleaning duty.

**JAKE TUCKER**Twitter
@_JakeTucker**This month**

In a daring heist, stole the most precious of things. Bath's Greggs is now out of Steak Bakes.

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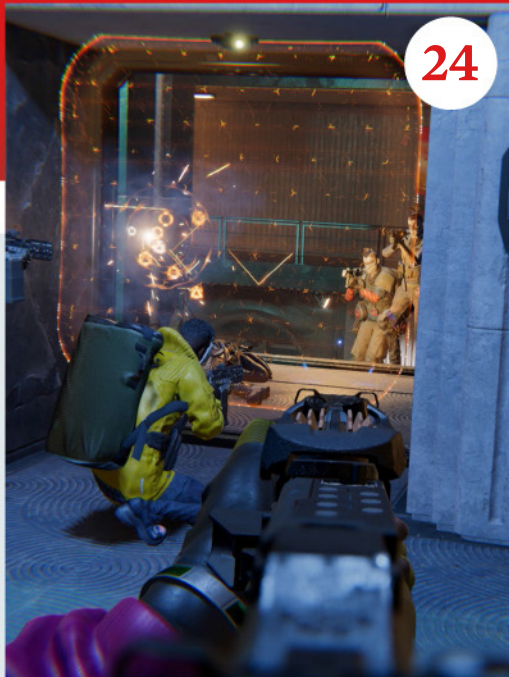
Fraser Brown travels to The Chinese Room to go fangs-on with its revamped World of Darkness RPG. A bloody embrace awaits, along with strong detective noir vibes.

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Phil Iwaniuk straps on (no, not that!) his jetpack and blasts off into the crazy alien world of *Revenge of the Savage Planet*, a new satirical action adventure sci-fi romp.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEBATE



WASTED

Take-Two nukes a playable GTA VI fan map

Good news, *GTA* fans: a dedicated modder has gone to great lengths to create a playable version of *GTA V*'s map in *GTA V*. Bad news, *GTA* fans: Take-Two has already decided it's not having any of that, and dispatched a battalion of lawyers to obliterate videos of it from the internet. As a result, our modder has also put the kibosh on people downloading it.

"In case you don't know, I basically created a playable *GTA V* map based on the leaks and the trailer shots of *GTA VI*," explains map creator Dark

TOP: He made that money infringing on Take-Two's copyright.

Space in a recent YouTube video. Dark Space based his project on a *GTA VI* community mapping project, one that's attempting to model the upcoming game's world based on trailers and leaks. It didn't come as a surprise, mind you: Dark Space says he always feared Take-Two might go nuclear on the project, and the only

real shock was that, "They didn't bother emailing me. My guess is that the map was probably a little too accurate. They must feel some sort of threat from it existing, because they feel that having a playable version of the map to drive around in could ruin the surprise and newness of *GTA VI* when it releases."

HE ALWAYS FEARED TAKE-TWO MIGHT GO NUCLEAR ON THE PROJECT

TAKEDOWNS

So Take-Two got YouTube to take down Dark Space's videos of the project, leveraging its ownership of all things *GTA* to have the footage thrown down the memory hole. Although Take-Two, in its infinite mercy, didn't issue takedowns against

DON'T TELL TODD

FREER DAYS



Former Bethesda dev Nate Purkeypile, who talked to us at GDC, told us the studio used to be a lot more freeform. Nowadays “you would basically get in trouble” for pursuing a passion project without telling anybody – which might have something to do with how stale *Starfield* felt, huh? ■ **HR**

KID PANCAKE

CHILD COLLISION



InZOI's promise to let you do anything went a bit too far when players discovered they could run over and kill children in their cars. Krafton was quick to declare the vehicular crimes as a bug, one which “does not reflect the intent and values of *InZOI*” before it was fixed. ■ **MT**



DISSOLVING DISCS

I SEE... NOTHING?



That *Cool Runnings* DVD in your drawer won't last forever. I'm so sorry. Disc rot is an inevitability, and DVDs have around 30 – 100 years of life in 'em. That is, unless it is one of a select few discs made by Warner Bros between 2006-2008, in which case it might be gone already. ■ **JR**



the actual download links for the maps, Dark Space “removed the download links to my mod, even though they didn't ask me to, but I think it's smarter to get out in front of them rather than waiting for their email (that will never come)”. He adds that the takedown took away a “income that I spent two months working hard to earn”.

It's a sad if predictable outcome for a project like this, driven by fan passion but which ran the risk – at least in executive heads – of spoiling Take-Two and Rockstar's best-laid plans for *GTA VI*'s marketing blitz. Dark Space is, well, less than thrilled about it.

“My map does not negatively affect their sales. It was building hype around the game and giving players something to enjoy while we waited for the next trailer. When will these companies learn to stop attacking their own feet? Because it's thanks to the community of players and modders that these companies can stand.”

Which is maybe a tad grandiose, although I don't disagree with the spirit of Dark Space's point. I don't think Rockstar, of all studios, needs any assistance keeping the hype train for *GTA VI* going, but I do agree that publishers would do better to recognise that modding communities are just hardcore fans who only make their games look better and livelier. ■

Joshua Wolens

TOP: Lucia will never misuse someone's IP again.

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Top model

Larian boss Swen Vincke says fan mods “shouldn't be treated like commercial ventures that infringe on your property.”

Hiddenjoker

Balatro's creator impressed with his *Balatro* skills at GDC, and nobody knew who he was.

Looking sharp

Monster Hunter Wilds will finally let players transmog their weapons.

AI don't want it

A Studio Ghibli AI image trend floods social media, cheered on by OpenAI and denounced by critics as an insult to Hayao Miyazaki.

Bloody hell

Nintendo's got a *Bloodborne* spiritual sequel – *The Duskbloods* – before PC even got the first game

Icarus falls

Eidos Montreal lays off “up to 75” employees.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The beach has always had a strong attraction for The Spy. Standing on one side of the divide, staring into the other, reminds The Spy of all that time spent upside down in air ducts, listening to whispered conversations just the other side of a thin metal barrier.

The breeze speaks to The Spy too, a sibilant-heavy and one-sided conversation from which The Spy, after years spent in silence at the top of a secret, unclimbable mountain in the Himalayas, can separate strands of meaning and make connections that no other mind could identify.

Here, neoprene-clad toes digging into the warm sand and with a high-tech motorcycle at the ready for a speedy getaway should one of The Spy's many enemies appear for a quick assassination attempt before lunch, The Spy can sift many truths from the breeze. Somewhere, an indie studio is making a roguelike deckbuilder. In a C-suite meeting at a major videogame publisher, a man in an expensive suit floats the idea of replacing everyone below him with AI before heading out to play squash, and later dinner at Dorsia. And at Kojima Productions, there's a trip to the beach planned.

Beaches in *Death Stranding* are spaces between life and death, much like Chesil Beach in January, and so *Death Stranding 2*'s subtitle, *On The Beach*, refers not to the kind of jolly family day out the memory of which The Spy tries so hard to repress, but instead a kind of alternative dimension that can be used to transfer data and create a kind of super-fast internet.

ONLY CONNECT

Death Stranding was, according to Kojima at least, a game about making connections. The Spy isn't so sure about that, instead preferring to wander the hills and landscapes with Sam and baby Lou while avoiding BTs, but then Kojima's actual mind is one of the few places The Spy has not yet been able to access. Instead The Spy listens to the wind, and it tells The Spy that *DS2* will have more varied landscapes than the first game, with jungles and an urban area with traffic, and a new zip line will help Sam move across large areas.



The wind rises, blowing up sand against The Spy's diamond-alloy visor. There will be even larger Beached Things, it howls, as well as robots not too dissimilar to those Kojima created for *Metal Gear Solid 4*, plus a new faction led by former porter Higgs Monaghan that provides much of the human threat in the landscape.

The breeze, salty with the tang of the sea, comes from a new angle. Baby Lou, it murmurs, has disappeared despite what the ending of *Death Stranding* might suggest, and a part of the sequel will be to discover what happened to BB-28 and Léa Seydoux's Fragile following an escape that sees them teleport through the Beach.

If there's one thing The Spy has learned from humanity's gaming output over the past decades, however, it's that teleporting and meddling in

alternative dimensions rarely results in good things for the planet Earth. Still, The Spy is happy on this beach. The seagulls soon get the message after a few tranquilliser darts, the chimes of an ice cream van are starting to filter through, and The Spy is weighing up the choice between raspberry ripple or a vodka martini. Sun's out. Spy out. ■
The Spy

PART OF THE SEQUEL WILL BE TO DISCOVER WHAT HAPPENED TO BB-28



THE SPY

The Spy is never happier than when all exits are visible, and the only enemy is the sand itself.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



CURSED ARTEFACTS

A second Tomb Raider Remastered trilogy tries to redeem **LARA'S CURSED ADVENTURE**

While every game should be preserved, not even a masterful team can turn fool's gold into true buried treasure. That seems a fair takeaway from the second *Tomb Raider Remastered* trilogy, released in February and featuring the less-loved latter three of Core Design's *Tomb Raider* games, including *Angel Of Darkness*.

I asked Jordan Reese, product manager at Aspyr, whether remastering all six games was the initial plan, especially considering how Lara's reputation began to crumble a bit after her third outing. He confirmed that they were in for the long-haul from the start. "Remastering the entire collection of classic *Tomb Raider* games was our goal from the start, so we're really happy with where we've gone with *Tomb Raider I-VI Remastered*," he said.

It's a fine plan on paper, but he does undersell the challenge in redeeming *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, one of the most famous flops in gaming history, and very nearly the death of one of the best-known franchises.

Aspyr's long-term commitment shows in the work done on the fourth and fifth games. If you've played the previous remaster trilogy, you'll know exactly what to expect; the same familiar, time-worn games, wrapped *Master Chief Collection*-style in a glossy new graphical

layer that can be toggled on or off freely. The same criticism and praise levelled at the first three applies here too. While the new graphics are impressive and feel authentic for the most part, they do shift Lara's look away from PS1-era stylisation (especially in its iridescent water and light effects) and more towards PS2-era pseudo-realism. A little more muted, a little more coherent.

While the changes in aesthetic when using the remastered assets are going to be a contentious issue, probably the biggest shortcoming of this remaster trilogy is the lack of any kind of level editor or mod tools, thus glossing over what I consider the true legacy of these games, and one vastly more positive than the still-awkward *Angel Of Darkness*. While Reese agreed that "editor tools are an awesome thing to include in any game," he didn't want to confirm or deny any plans for full creation tools, and instead pointed to the new fly-by camera mode. Useful for machinima creators, but underwhelming next to the potential of deeper modding.

The original PC version of *Tomb Raider 4* included a powerful level editor that not only allowed people to create their own maps and adventures for Lara, but also export them as fully standalone executables, free and legal to share without anyone else needing to purchase the game. Decades later, community-enhanced versions of these tools are still being used to create new levels and



Time Out

Probably the deepest cut in this remaster trilogy is the return of a short *TR4* bonus level, originally a standalone free release hosted by London-based newspaper The Times. After an dry cutscene conversation with at-the-Times editor Peter Stothard, Lara sets out to Egypt to explore a handful of cursed chambers.



FAR LEFT: Lara gets practical and tactical in the latter parts of *Chronicles*.



LEFT: Lara's ill-fated AoD co-star Kurtis looks like an avatar of the early 2000s.

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME *Angel of Darkness* sees some improvements, but other areas still remain flawed



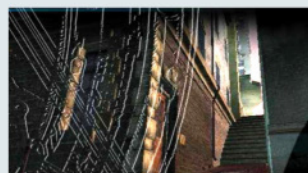
GUNS OUT

In the original release, Lara somehow managed to misplace one of her famously paired pistols.



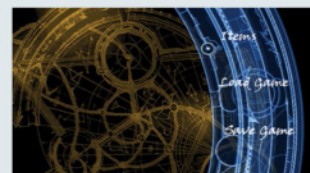
HINDSIGHT IS 20/20

While the graphics aren't nearly as striking, there are a lot of previously-unreadable signs cleaned up in *TR6*.



NOW LOADING

Despite the 'overworld' of Paris being small for 2003, the remaster has ugly loading screens on every other street.



NOT REVOLUTIONARY

Another area sadly unimproved is *AoD*'s dull menus. You'll miss the spinnny disc of 3D options from the earlier games.

full-length fangames. Thousands of them. Almost all of which you can find for download at community hubs TRCustoms.org and TRLE.net.

FALLEN ANGEL

While the remasters of the fourth and fifth games are pretty much a direct continuation of what Aspyr did with the first three, this trilogy caps off with a fascinatingly flawed game. *Angel of Darkness* was the first PS2 game in the series, and the last for a very long time after being critically panned. A rushed, clunky and wrongheaded game that tried to shoehorn Lara's *Prince Of Persia*-style movement into modern environments full of narrow hallways and edges to get caught on. Even if it hadn't been buggy and poorly balanced, it was just a pain to move around in.

While the remaster doesn't change the graphics in *Angel Of Darkness* nearly as much as the other games, it's the one to receive the most substantial changes. From small bits recovered from the cutting room floor, to the addition of a couple of stores that let you stock up on gear using a previously perfunctory cash system. There's even a tutorial area now. A poor substitute for Lara's home, but still a step up.

Probably the biggest change is ironically one that was already in place from the first trilogy of remasters. While the 'modern' control system was offered previously, it never quite made sense to me to have twitchy camera-relative movement in a game built around slower, precise grid-based navigation. *Angel Of Darkness* on the other hand has a much more cramped world; one that resists

navigation via old tank-controls Lara. And so the old-new technology finally finds its purpose, making the claustrophobic streets and apartments of Paris much easier to get around. Not perfect, but notably improved.

But even with these changes and a few more (including more supernatural combat options for soulpatched secondary protagonist Kurtis, and a return of Lara's iconic dual pistols), it's still a bit of a clunker, and not in the intentional and exacting way that the first five games are. Sometimes it's not obviously clear which

items can be pushed or interacted with, sometimes the shifting, fixed camera angles will obscure the way forward, and with the world being less precise and grid-based overall, it's frequently difficult to judge potentially lethal jumps.

But for all its flaws and shortcomings, this second remaster trilogy is unarguably a net positive.

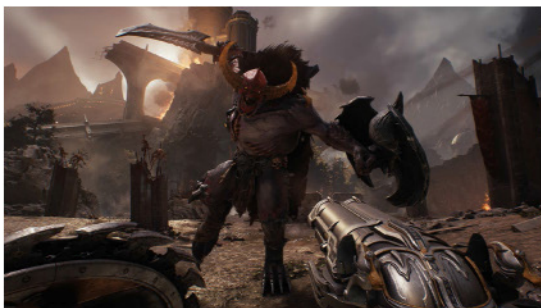
Even if it's still flawed and janky, *Tomb Raider 6* is still an important piece of history (even if it's as 'the game that nearly killed *Tomb Raider*'), and can now be experienced in less painful fashion, joining the likes of *PO'ed* and *Turok 3* in a growing pantheon of fascinatingly flawed games given a second chance.

As for what's next for Aspyr's remaster crew, Reese was tight-lipped, saying that they've got nothing to announce yet, but to "stay tuned". Given they're part of Embracer's incomprehensible network of studios, there's nothing stopping them from trying to redeem *Duke Nukem Forever* next, if they're still up for a challenge. ■

Dominic Tarason

THE BIGGEST SHORTCOMING IS THE LACK OF ANY KIND OF LEVEL EDITOR

1 month



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE May 15, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

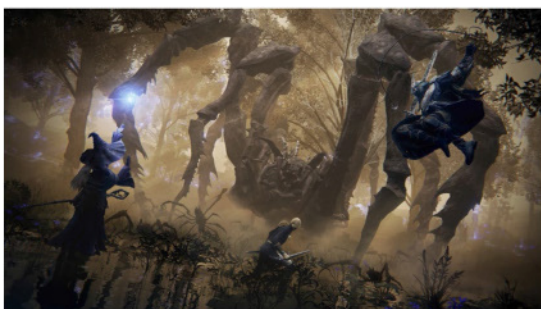
Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. There's a throwable Shield Saw!



DUNE: AWAKENING

RELEASE May 20, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Funcom

A massive-scale multiplayer survival game with crafting, ornithopters and, naturally, giant sandworms. Can you survive Arrakis, the most hostile of planets?



ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

RELEASE May 30, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware

The out of left-field *Elden Ring* spin-off sees the action RPG transformed into a wild new co-op roguelike RPG. Expect fast runs and the series' typically epic bosses.

2 months



STELLAR BLADE

RELEASE June 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Shift Up Corporation

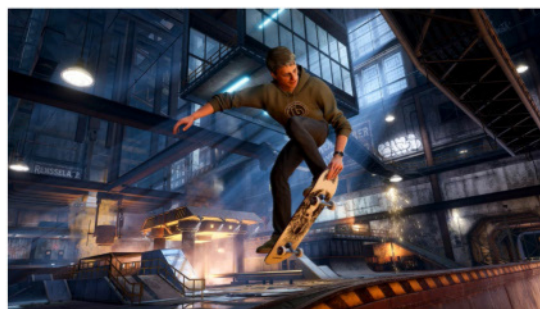
The stunning action-RPG that was a smash hit as a PlayStation 5 exclusive gets ported to PC. Expect insane combat, crazy super moves and giant bosses.



BROKEN ARROW

RELEASE JUNE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

A large-scale real-time modern warfare tactics game with more than 300 realistic military units to control and customise. Wield a unique army building system.



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3 + 4

RELEASE July 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Iron Galaxy Studios

The legendary skating sims return with more skaters, new skate parks, gnarlier tricks, fresh beats, cross-platform multiplayer and upgraded graphics. Grab some air!

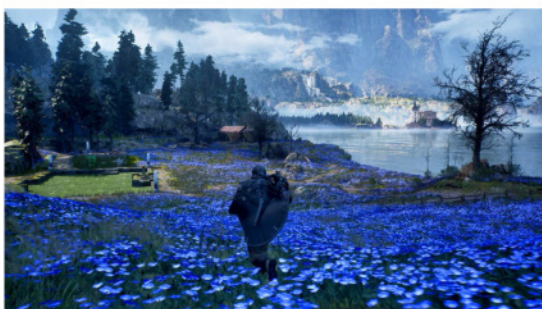
3 months



METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Konami

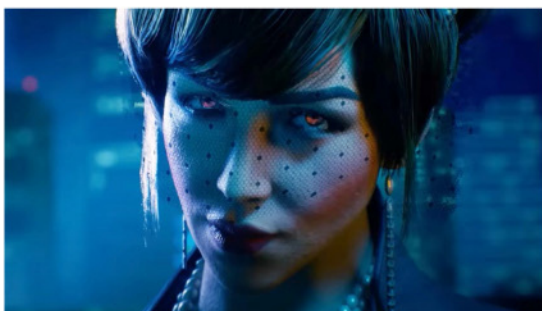
SNAKE returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to an UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.



HELL IS US

RELEASE September 4, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rogue Factor

A third-person action-adventure game set in a post-calamity future Earth where the planet is rife with civil war infighting. No map, no compass and no quest markers.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!

4 months+



BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

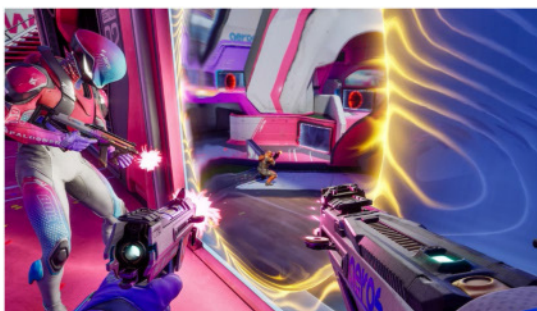
The famous mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action.



CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action adventure set in the same universe as popular MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the beautiful yet brutal continent of Pywel.



SPLITGATE 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** 1047 Games

If you wanted to know what would happen if you smashed *Unreal Tournament*, *Halo* and *Portal* together, then *Splitgate 2* answers that. Frenetic shooting action.



MOD

MASTERCRAFTED

If you've been enjoying *Kingdom Come Deliverance II*, then you absolutely should grab the Dragonborn armour and weapon collection, as created by talented modder MAJOR76. The set includes a helmet, cuirass, gauntlets, short sword and long sword. Grab them here: tinyurl.com/mwyj7zsf





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 2025

DEVELOPER
inZOI Studio

PUBLISHER
Krafton

LINK
tinyurl.com/43vh8u3r

INZOI

A gorgeous life sim with so many unimportant things to do

For a game so insistent on letting me forge my own narrative, *inZOI* makes it weirdly difficult to do so. I'm a real sucker for a meet-cute storyline, so I've been making my Zoi chat up a guy she met in the park, Will Stewart – he's all artsy with curly hair and spends his entire day painting at an easel, the exact sort of soft creative that fits the plot I'm conjuring in my head in real time.

I send my Zoi home after hours of bouncing around conversation topics with wildly varying vibes – the rise of AI, the stock prospects of the K-pop industry, my go-to pizza recipe, all perfectly normal stuff to talk to a relative stranger about – ready to continue the conversation with Will over the phone. Except, er, I can't seem to call him. Or invite him round. Or even email him. He's a total ghost, only existing within the confines of his park easel. Which he insisted on returning to between each interaction, by the way.

Turns out that was only the first of many bizarre roadblocks I'd encounter in my 30 hours of seemingly being in a constant push-pull against *inZOI*'s simulation. Sure, the game has all the necessary parts to stand side by side with *The Sims*, but it has a lot more to do before it can actually get there.

ALL STYLE, NO SUBSTANCE

I mean, that's understandable to an extent. Not only is *inZOI* launching into

Early Access, it's also got approximately, you know, 25 years of Maxis legacy knowledge to contend with. Especially since this is basically the only other game we've had vaguely resembling *The Sims* in over two decades. It feels wild that I'm even getting the chance to play an alternative that comes close to its size and scale.

And like, *inZOI* certainly has a lot going on. Sort of. I can do all the usual life sim stuff: get a job, take care of my various needs, throw parties, fall in love, level up skills, give birth, grow old, die. But so much of it never dares to delve beyond its surface level concept. There are no finer details. I can take care of my needs, like hunger, but I can't cook a meal for my whole family. I can schedule a beach volleyball session, but I can't actually interact with the net. I can fall in love... as long as we're both in the same little patch of the map.

Small details, ones that barely push into anything particularly in-depth that I fully expected to be present, simply weren't. I lost count of how many times I tried to do something in *inZOI*, only to sit there dumbfounded that it wasn't possible. Let's go back to our pal Will, for example. I'm basically stalking him in the park at this point, as it's the only way we can actually communicate, and I realise it would be so much easier if I asked him to move in. Except, it seems like I can't actually do that unless we're married.

So I propose. A beautiful cutscene plays – because to its credit, *inZOI* is largely a gorgeous game – and the wedding happens the next day. The game asks me how long I want the wedding to last, and because I have no grasp on how quickly time flows in the game right now (turns out, incredibly slowly) I set it to the maximum, 12 hours. I've been conditioned by my *Sims* brain to know how many hours one small activity takes, and I can always leave early, right? Wrong. I'm locked into the entire half-day event, with no amount of clicking around menus leading me to any tangible option to call it quits.

WAITING FOR GRUB-O

My Zoi is starving, and thankfully there's a kitchen set up in this wedding venue.

PLAYED
IT

I CAN'T SEEM TO CALL HIM. OR INVITE HIM ROUND. OR EVEN EMAIL HIM. HE'S A GHOST



➤ But clicking on the appliances does nothing. I send my Zoi home for a quick bite and bring her back, and proceed to sit through several in-game hours at high speed as all my guests clutch at their stomachs, desperate for a morsel of grub. Even at 10x speed, the game seems to crawl through the minutes.

Not to take away from the handful of sweet moments I had at my wedding, though. There are several actions that are coupled with animations that are the perfect photo opp, and *inZOI*'s photo mode is always a single click away to take advantage of that. But often I felt like the only reason half of the interactions were even there was to take a pretty screenshot and move on. Style without substance.

Even once I have married Zois together and interacting with each other, it feels incredibly stilted. Conversation topics continue to be tonally jarring – I can discuss “how to eat more and still not gain weight”, which doesn't feel entirely appropriate, with some occasional dabbling in the whimsy of talking about how there's a cat only I can see.

But then, my spousal Zois start texting each other about how they're in therapy, and going through a tough time. I'm sorry, what? It felt like a totally left-field interaction, one which didn't even seem to be steeped in any emotions my Zois were going through. They'd felt tranquil and sentimental, but not sad. It's a constant tonal whiplash and I can't quite pinpoint what vibe *inZOI* is exactly trying to go for.

I'm going to put some of this down to localisation, which makes the whole thing feel weirdly sanitised at the moment. There's a stark lack of personality which makes the above interactions feel even stranger, and I feel Krafton could really benefit by bringing in some native English speakers to sprinkle *inZOI*'s dialogue with some actual human-sounding language.

UNCANNY VALLEY

While *inZOI* is lacking in the 'sounding human' department, it doesn't have that problem when it comes to looking human. The game is stunning, boasting ultra-realistic-looking Zois and a detailed

world. Admittedly, that realism meant I was struggling to pull and tug at the Create-a-Zoi sliders to make something normal-looking, somehow always veering into horrifyingly gaunt or butt-chinned instead. *inZOI* also seems to have a strange aversion to the thin-lipped, actively resisting my attempts to make anyone who wasn't sporting at least half a millilitre of filler.

While customisation options are fairly limited right now, there's still a lot to do with them. Most hairstyles have different colour blocking options, to the point I was actually able to recreate my own slightly bizarre colour-blocked hair to a T, which was an unexpected yet pleasant surprise. *inZOI* has also established the foundations to create bespoke clothing items, like tops with different collars, sleeves and torso types.

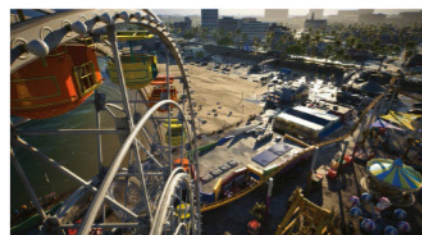
It's very basic right now, but the stuff that's there I really do like. It's a great way to refine an item of clothing you want to tweak just a tiny bit, and everything can be coloured whichever way you like. I will say that clothes seem to be lacking in texture right now, but I assume that's because it wants you to make use of its AI technology. I do not like it. We'll get to that.

Zois can be instilled with different values and life goals, sort of similar to *The Sims 4*'s aspirations and traits. It does seem a little more streamlined though, as *inZOI* groups traits up into certain personality types rather than letting me select them individually. I'll need more time to determine just how much it shapes behaviours, but the most I seemed to notice at a glance were certain dialogue options or interactions, like those who value co-existence being able to rummage through dressers to donate clothes.

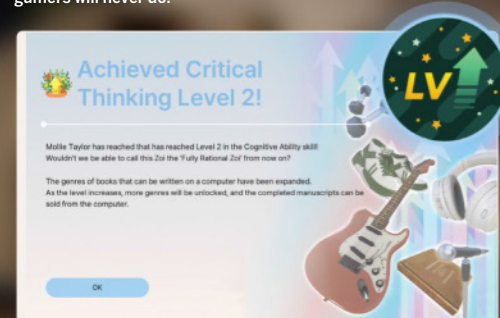
It is hard to deny just how pretty and model-like everyone looks though, which again feeds into *inZOI* seemingly being one big photo opportunity. As an iPhone user, I can even hook my phone up to the game to enable facial capture – a terrifying thing that allows me to move my Zoi's face with my own. It doesn't feel like a feature that has much legs outside its initial gimmick, and I do wish Krafton had focused its efforts elsewhere.

BUILD A LIFE

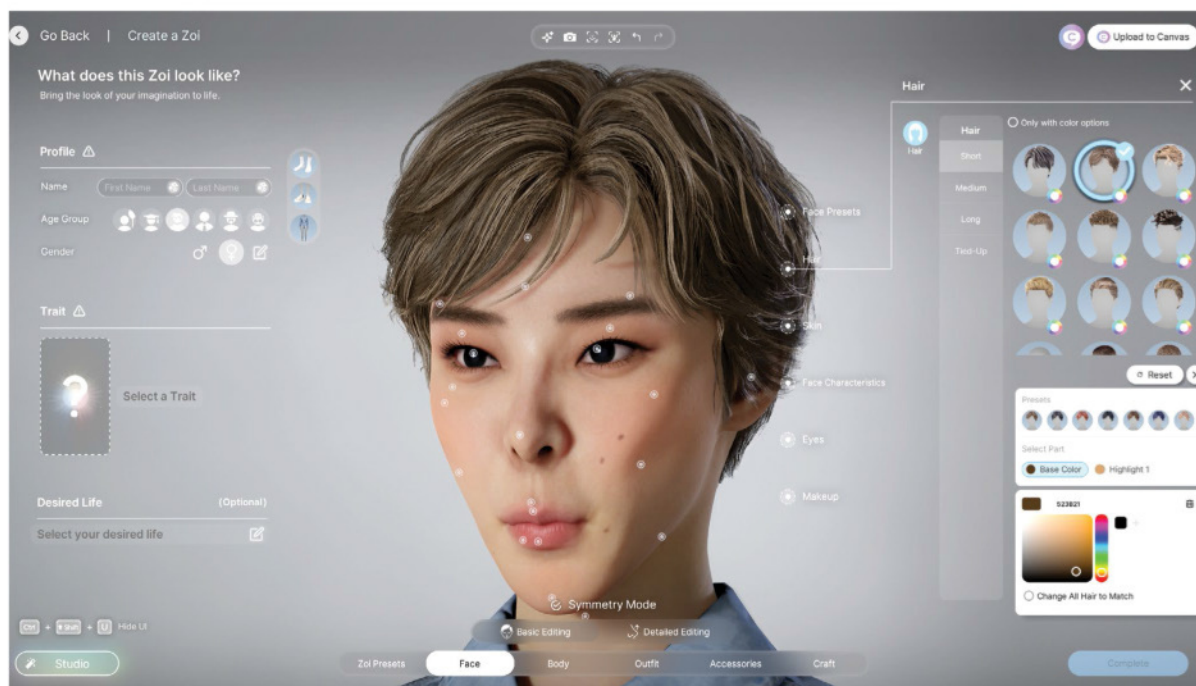
But hey, I'm not really much of a character creator in life sims, I'm a build-buy girlie. I'm still sort of on the fence about how *inZOI* handles its build



Something console gamers will never do.



MY SPOUSAL ZOIS START TEXTING EACH OTHER ABOUT HOW THEY'RE IN THERAPY



ABOVE: What's this photo of Mollie doing in here?

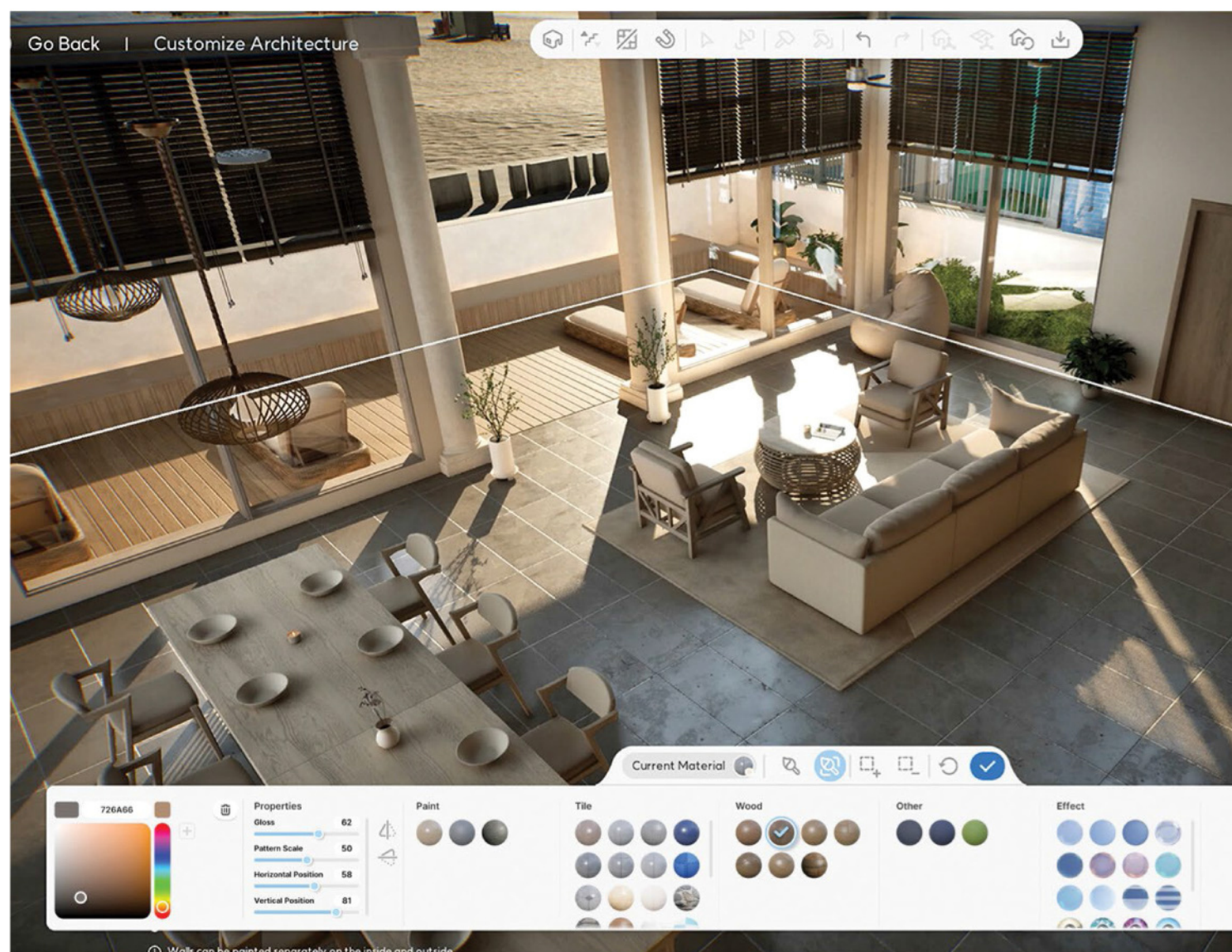
LEFT: The character creator tool is seriously impressive.

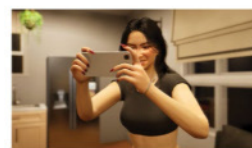
PREVIEW

inZOI

RIGHT: That's a classy wedding dress. Shame hardly anyone was there to see it.

BELOW: You have the tools to craft sweet homes for your Zois.





mode, which feels like the thing Krafton has prioritised the least right now. Something I do love is that every plot comes with preset layouts and designs that I can switch out at the click of a button. Empty lots have a handful of different buildings I can place down if I don't feel like making my own, and pre-made lots come with different interior layouts for me to switch out if I don't like the base offering.

This was the thing I actually loved the most about *inZOI*, a feature I desperately wish was more present in *The Sims*. A good chunk of the prebuilds are wonderfully designed too, with clutter galore and a lived-in vibe. When it came to decorating myself, though, I frequently ran into issues like being unable to put rugs underneath certain types of furniture or unclear pathing issues. Thankfully the furniture has more texture options than the clothing – different types of wood and cloth patterns, even if most of them amount to stripes or grids.

But hey, why not take advantage of the MYtexture system? It's just one of the many AI features Krafton insists on shoving down my throat, and I hate it. For starters, the technology behind it is terrible, reminiscent of the early 2021 eldritch horrors that AI would spit out. I started out by asking for a simple zebra print, which somehow still managed to look slightly off. While it seems to have some sort of copyright barrier – inputting words like 'Goku' and 'Sonic' conjured up designs that were not at all Goku or Sonic – there's seemingly no moderation on anything more unsavoury.

There's also the 3D printer feature, which allows me to take a real-life image and plug it into *inZOI*, which'll then spit back out in the form of a slightly disfigured 3D model. I first tried it with a couch cushion I own, which fed back to me a vague recreation from the front, while the back was horribly deformed. I managed to get a fairly decent-looking virtual version of my Shadow the Hedgehog plushie, only to try and place it to discover it was freaking huge. For how much Krafton has harped on about all these AI gadgets and gizmos, I didn't find they enriched my experience at all.

Another fun gimmick to muck around with before realising I was probably never going to use it in a meaningful way.

A LONG WAY TO GO

It's not just houses I can decorate, though. *inZOI* lets me tweak the whole city – what appears on billboards, the types of trees that line the streets, how much litter there is – it's a nice addition for further tweaking things and creating a unique experience each time, and I hope it's something that's expanded upon in the future. Both Dowon, its Korea-inspired map, and America-based Bliss Bay are awfully pretty to look at, offering some unique features like Dowon's K-pop entertainment conglomerate and Bliss Bay's huge stretch of beach. It even leads to a couple of unique career opportunities depending on where you're playing, with Dowon having an exclusive K-pop idol job.

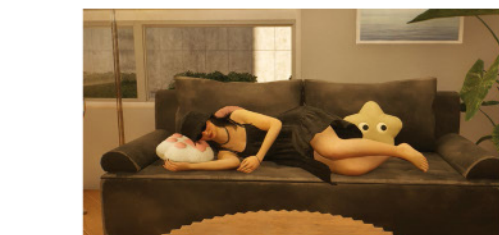
Commercial lots even have specific opening times, which is a layer of realism I actually don't love. It meant any time I wanted to venture off my home lot I was essentially having to make sure it was before 9pm, otherwise I'd be met with locked doors or shuttered food vans. It took away an element of freedom, leaving me with little option other than to sit in my home lot, wishing the time away.

Ultimately, *inZOI*'s biggest issue right now is that it's simply not very fun, and that's worrying even for a game that has launched into early access. Even when I went ahead and brought my day length down to half the default time – 96 minutes to 48 – time seemed to drag on. Right now it feels like I'm trying too hard to have a good time in *inZOI*'s clinical world, because I desperately wanted it to be good. Sadly, for me, it wasn't.

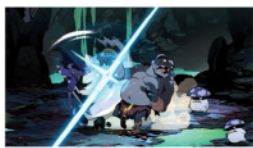
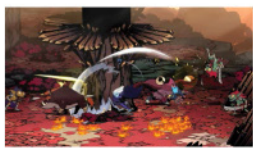
Honestly, after playing *inZOI* in its current state, I would have preferred if Krafton had given this game even more time to cook. It almost feels like I'm playing pretend at playing pretend right now – engaging with a variety of set pieces I can do a cute peace sign in front of before moving onto the next thing. In an attempt to offer something different to *The Sims*, *inZOI* has failed to establish any sort of identity of its own. I'm not even sure Krafton knows what direction it wants to take right now, but it needs to figure that out quickly, otherwise I fear it'll be another casualty of the genre. *inZOI* is out now in Early Access.

Mollie Taylor

ULTIMATELY, INZOI'S BIGGEST ISSUE RIGHT NOW IS THAT IT'S SIMPLY NOT VERY FUN



Absolum



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Guard Crush Games

PUBLISHER
Dotemu

LINK
dotemu.com

ABSOLUM

This feels like it could be the future of a classic genre

Genre hybrids are everywhere these days – just in 2025 so far I've already played a turn-based Soulslike and a city-building Tetris deckbuilder – but some new combos are so natural that it seems mad that there aren't already a hundred games doing the same thing. *Absolum's* mix of side-scrolling beat 'em up and roguelike action-RPG is the best example.

Beat 'em ups thrive in repetition – the classic formula is a short series of levels that you play over and over trying for a better and better performance. *Absolum* is the same, but it layers in roguelike progression systems, allowing you to gain abilities and items during a run, and upgrades between runs. The result is really compelling – a beat 'em up that keeps giving me reasons to get excited about starting a new run.

Putting structure aside for a second, at the core of *Absolum* is just extremely good 2D combat. Both developer Guard Crush Games and publisher Dotemu have serious experience in the genre – the former developed *Streets of Rage 4*, and the latter published it as well as the excellent *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge*.

Like those, *Absolum* feels like a thoroughly modern take on this style of fighting, retaining the satisfying fundamentals while giving you the tools to feel more in control than we used to back in the golden arcade era. Here, that means a generous parry and a versatile dodge, both of which not only take you out of

harm's way, but when used at the right time open up follow-up attack opportunities. The result strikes a pleasing balance between being much easier and more forgiving to get into than the classics, but still having the nuances and subtlety to reward honing your skills.

SPELL SCROLL

Helping it all feel as slick as possible is the absolutely gorgeous hand-drawn animation. Though I'll admit the fantasy setting doesn't do much for me in terms of storytelling it all looks fantastic, and every impact is satisfying in combat.

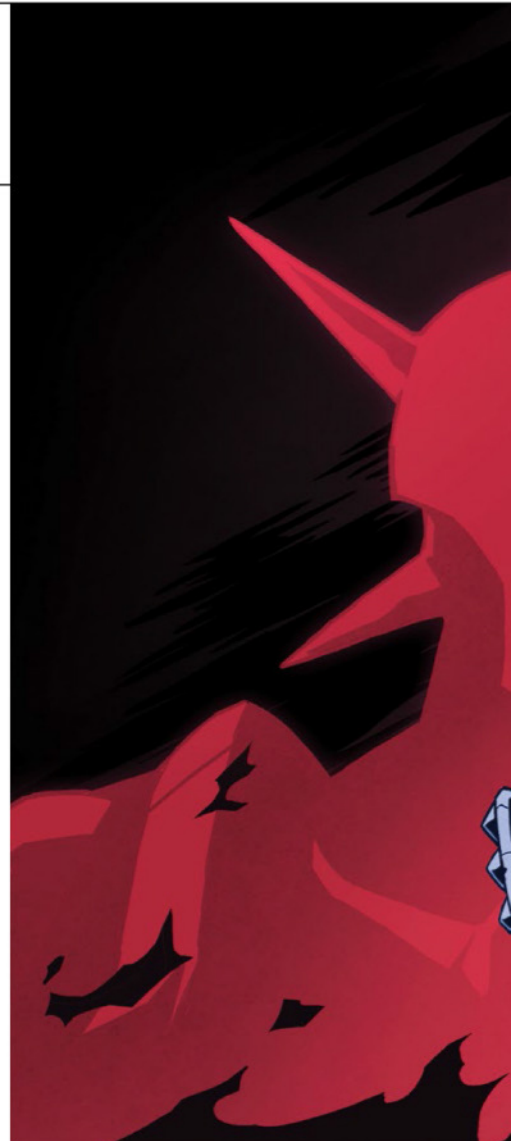
The two starting protagonists – a willowy elf and a stocky dwarf – show off the flexibility of the art style wonderfully. The former feels lithe and agile, switching between graceful martial arts and swings with an enormous greatsword. Playing as the latter feels like being in control of an angry bowling ball, smashing his way between enemies with a snarl, and then pulling out a blunderbuss to blast them.

More characters will be unlockable in the final game, and each boasts their own selection of super moves, as well as being able to unlock different abilities over the course of a run. Add to that elemental modifiers you can earn as you play, and interesting playstyles and combos quickly emerge.

In one run you'll be focusing on perfect parries, using them to build up static charge that you can unleash in a devastating chain-lighting punch. In another, you'll be leaping across the screen landing flaming divekicks, making any foe that falls explode in an inferno that sends their buddies reeling. The core moves remain the same, allowing you to build your mastery, but there's enough spice there to nudge you towards different approaches, ensuring runs stay fresh.

If *Streets of Rage 4* and *TMNT: Shredder's Revenge* were trying to modernise the beat 'em up, *Absolum* feels like the next step: broadening its appeal. It mixes the elements that make a classic side-scrolling brawler fun with roguelike elements that give the average player more obvious reasons to come back again and again – offering sustained progression alongside the satisfaction of mastering your skills.

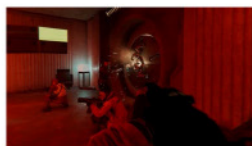
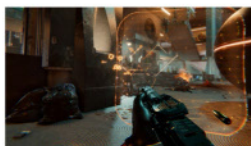
Robin Valentine



HELPING IT ALL FEEL AS SLICK AS POSSIBLE IS THE GORGEOUS ANIMATION



LEFT: Though the preview build was singleplayer only, the full game will have online and local co-op.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
10 ChambersPUBLISHER
10 ChambersLINK
DenofWolves.com

DEN OF WOLVES

10 Chambers' kinetic co-op heister is a cyberpunk take on Payday 2

Den of Wolves makes me feel like I'm drowning. In my brief playtest, a first hands-on for 10 Chambers' heist 'em up taking place in Tokyo, I found that when the enemies start to push at you from every direction it's often all you can do to stay alive, let alone push toward your objectives.

If you want to keep your head above the enemy tide hitting you from all directions, you'll need to stay close to your teammates. We failed near the final hurdle in our first attempt at *Den of Wolves*, but pulled it out of the bag for the second, extracting with nearly empty weapons, bags full of loot and a mission well done. Live or die in *Den of Wolves*, you'll do it alongside your teammates.

That singular focus on the squad feels like 10 Chambers is doing what it was made to do. The developer has made a name for itself as a studio that wants to make co-op games at their most punishing. It was a company founded with developers that conceptualised and developed *Payday* and *Payday 2*.

Hell, in an interview with, um, me, over at NME, studio CEO and co-founder Ulf Andersson explained that they were "back on that heist shit".

Outside of that bold statement of intent, information was scarce. Since then we've learnt a lot more about the world. *Den of Wolves* is about criminals trying to accumulate wealth, but the

setting is much more interesting than most heist games. Midway island has become a lawless corporate haven where corporations screw each other over relentlessly for profit. So far, so London in 2025, but add a futuristic setting, body modifications and a whole lot of neon lights, and *Den of Wolves* is giving cyberpunk vibes, instead.

BODY HORROR

My favourite bit, if you're asking, is the body horror aspect that sees human beings being used to store data. It's like Johnny Mnemonic but instead of boyishly cute Keanu Reeves you've got people encased in a goopy cell, waiting to get robbed. That's what we're here to do during this first hands on. In this case, we'll be cosying up to a gangster to get access to a vault containing one of those human USBs before betraying him and his gang to lift the data right out of his noggin for ourselves.

Before that, we're performing a smaller heist to get our hands on some hunter killing robots to facilitate that double-cross. 10 Chambers claims that all of the heists in *Den of Wolves* will be smaller multi-part events that build towards the main event. This structure feels like *GTA Online's* own heists, where you'll do a few smaller things to line everything up before sinking a lot more time into the main event, which is the grand finale.

In play, this side mission feels like a starter. The four of us tackle a couple of rooms full of guards and I mess up the stealth sections magnificently, but it takes around ten minutes and doesn't feel too challenging.

It's a breath of fresh air to be able to make your way through levels without being fully switched on because usually, when the bullets start flying, *Den of Wolves* feels like the spiritual successor to *Payday* it's been billing itself as. Enemies pour out of every doorway towards you as your squad tries to hoof bags of loot around and adapt to the ever changing objectives as they pop up while keeping a close eye on how many rounds you have less.

In the two missions that I played, these objectives involved hitting buttons, cracking open vaults or standing on little

PLAYED
IT

STUDIO CEO ULF ANDERSSON EXPLAINED THAT THEY WERE "BACK ON THAT HEIST SHIT"





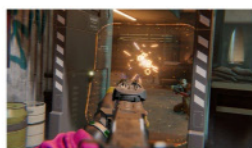
PREVIEW

Den of Wolves

RIGHT: Peppering enemies with bullets is the way to go with both SMGs and assault rifles.

BELOW: Midway City, the setting for the game, is full of strong cyberpunk flavour.





circles on the ground. At face value this sounds simplistic, but dealing with the attacking enemies and communicating with your team will take up the majority of your brain space, the actual objectives are often an afterthought. Sure, you're pushing a button but it's in a control room and you'll need to fight through a few hundred enemies to get there, with finite health and ammo making that much more difficult than just holding down the left mouse button and advancing.

BIGGER GUNS

Being candid, right now, guns feel underwhelming. The marksman rifle that I was using feels less like a sniper rifle and closer in feel to a single-shot rifle like a Garand, able to do precise damage, but without any real zoom it was hard to land precise shots on target. The assault rifle and SMG felt closer to what I'd expect, but single bullets don't feel like they have much impact, so I'd often hose my enemies down with lead as I aggressively moved towards them.

There's a few different types of gear but during my hands-on I mostly used the transparent portable shield, which you can deploy onto a hard surface and pick up for reuse easily. In hectic fights I'd toss this to the ground and then weave around it, taking out enemies before crouching beside it to reload and take stock of the situation from a safe defensive position.

A combination of the guns and the gear mean that combat feels scrappy and you'll often want to have a few people shooting at a time to guarantee results, which fits with 10 Chambers' tight focus on cooperative combat, but being candid it felt unsatisfying for me. At this early stage it's hard to say whether this is something that balancing can fix or whether it's just a case of user error at my end, but I found myself often wishing I could do something that felt more damaging to my opponents.

Still, it's clear just looking at the shooting that *Den of Wolves* is going to deliver on its promise of being a tough co-op shooter that needs you to lose

your ego and work as a tight-knit group to succeed. The shooting feels like it's nearly there and that's going to be key because this is a much more combat focused game than *GTFO*, the studio's last effort.

Or maybe that's just me, because any time I tried to do anything even resembling stealth, I crashed out, mistiming my stealth kills and plunging my squad into a fight to the death again and again. I don't even feel bad.

Where *Den of Wolves* feels like it will elevate things is with the world it is offering up. 10 Chambers has a real sense of spectacle and it's managed to imbue a strong sense of identity into *Den of Wolves*. A large part of this is in the incredible soundtrack, a Simon Viklund special that manages to amp me up in the fights and keep me on edge when things have cooled off. Viklund is best known for his work on the *Payday* games and *GTFO*, but I think he's doing some of his best work so far here in *Den of Wolves*, and I'm eager to see what else we might get in a full release.

Better yet, the shady Midway City feels like a fun environment to run some heists in. Cyberpunk isn't often explored in shooters, and while we do have *Cyberpunk 2077* and I have a deep love for *Deus Ex* and the *System Shock* games, the possibility space of being able to team up with your friends to hack the planet is one that excites me more than robbing a diamond store. There seems to be a rich world to explore in *Den of Wolves*, and I can see little threads of narrative even in this early playtest. 10 Chambers has promised the story will be light touch, there for players that want to dig into things but not overtly presented. If I can find out more about this world between putting down waves of corpo goons and criminals, I can see myself being invested.

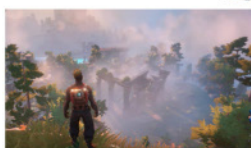
My worries about the combat aside, the game got its hooks in early and feels oddly compelling. If the shooting gets a bit of a tune up and the game launches into early access (right now there is still no confirmed release date for *Den of Wolves*) with a few interesting missions, it's easy to see a loyal fanbase gathering around the game like several heist games before it. Hell, there's a good chance I'll be one of them, as there is no doubting that I love the idea of a cooperative heist shooter that offers dramatic and dynamic play sessions.

Jake Tucker

**MIDWAY CITY FEELS LIKE
A FUN ENVIRONMENT TO
RUN SOME HEISTS IN**

PREVIEW

Echoes of Elysium



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Coming soon

DEVELOPER
Loric Games

PUBLISHER
Snail Games USA

LINK
tinyurl.com/4j7dvmmj

ECHOES OF ELYSIUM

In this survival game, I faced an enemy worth punching trees over

Sometime in the first or second century AD, the ancient Greek mathematician Heron of Alexandria invented the world's first steam engine. In *Echoes of Elysium*, an upcoming survival game from Loric Games, Heron didn't stop there: he punched a hole into Elysium, the mythic paradise of Greco-Roman mythology, where he's harvesting the souls of heroes to power a legion of automatons.

During a hands-on preview demo at this year's GDC, Loric Games told me that, by reclaiming Elysium from Heron's mechanical hordes, I would be battling "the hubris of man". And as we all know, the best weapon against mankind's hubris is a sick airship. *Echoes of Elysium* is the latest in a line of recent survival games trading the genre tradition of tree-punching and stationary base-building for mobile base construction. Instead of building forts and cabins, up to six players can piece together flying Greco-Roman triremes with cannons and jet thrusters powered by the condensed energies of the afterlife.

In my demo, *Echoes of Elysium* felt like a middle ground between the expected resource gathering and *Sea of Thieves*-style shipboard shenanigans. As I cobbled together a flying ship from bits of flotsam drifting between Elysium's floating islands, I equipped my makeshift vessel with harpoon guns for spearing nearby resources and sawblade launchers for mass-harvesting trees. Those sawblade launchers, I discovered, are also good for

sending your ship into a mad spiral and launching your shipmates into the void if you fire a fully-charged shot into your own hull. Heron isn't the only scientific mind in this particular afterlife.

In *Echoes of Elysium*, a ship's construction affects its handling and speed. Better materials are more durable, but they're heavier and require more propulsion. As a result, Loric Games says it's seen its playtesters build fleets of purpose-built ships: heavy, slow motherships with storage and crafting stations, more nimble haulers for scooping up and shuttling back resources.

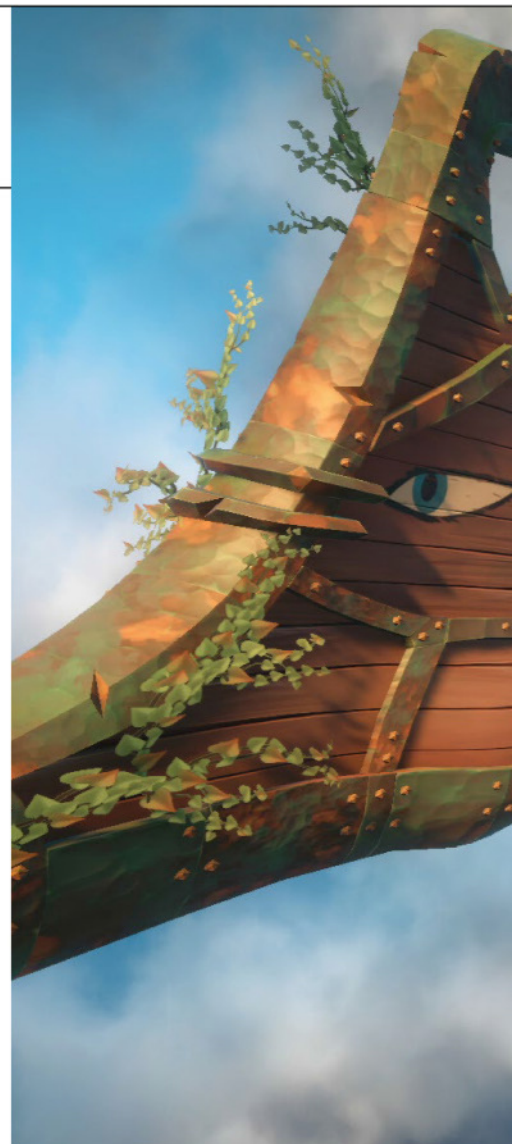
TRIEME AND TESTED

A neat touch I enjoyed was that all ship wall components are curved. Loric Games says it's partially for aesthetics – no flat walls means ships naturally skew towards the classic trireme profile. But it's also a functional decision: crafting benches and research stations all nestle against the rounded hull, so the central corridor of the ship remains unobstructed when you're sprinting between turrets and cannons during combat against Heron's fleets.

I only got a brief taste of *Echoes of Elysium*'s ship-building for myself. Thanks to the time pressures of a GDC expo floor preview, I ended up piloting a vessel shaped more like a barrel. But Loric Games has a standalone shipbuilder, so we can all sample the airship construction. By the time you read this preview, that shipbuilder will already be out, so you'll be able to try it for yourself. And, considering the minimum specs for *Echoes of Elysium* are very humble, with just a GeForce GTX 950 or Radeon HD 7970 graphics card required, along with 8GB of RAM and a 2.6 GHz quad-core CPU, you're going to have no problem running it.

Any ship designs you make in the standalone shipbuilder can be saved as a blueprint that you'll be able to import and build in-game when *Echoes of Elysium* launches in Early Access later this year. You can even add your ship blueprints to Heron's forces, if you want to draft up your own enemy armada. I'm more keen on seeing what my airship looks like when it's actually ship-shaped. *Echoes of Elysium* is due for an Early Access launch this year.

Lincoln Carpenter



I EQUIPPED MY MAKESHIFT VESSEL WITH HARPOON GUNS FOR SPEARING RESOURCES



ABOVE: Tricking out your airship with big guns and go faster decals is mandatory.

LEFT: You've got to fight, for your right, to haaaaarvest!

FBC: Firebreak



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Remedy EntertainmentPUBLISHER
Remedy EntertainmentLINK
tinyurl.com/3z8y8ajb

FBC: FIREBREAK

New co-op shooter is built for chaos and 'joyful discoveries'

For nearly 30 years developer Remedy Entertainment has been in the business of making narrative-driven singleplayer games. Just look at the levels Remedy has gone to in *Alan Wake 2* to knit it into what is now known as the Remedy Connected Universe, which sees lore, characters and narrative threads from various of the studio's other singleplayer games shared to some degree.

All of which ensures that, however you slice it, the biggest question hanging over its upcoming co-op shooter, *FBC: Firebreak*, is 'why?' With its multiplayer, systems-driven action and absence of cutscenes or scripted story sequences, it's certainly not the *Control* follow-up diehard Remedy fans would be expecting. "You should expect the unexpected from Remedy!" says *Firebreak* game director Mike Kayatta. "The studio has changed quite a bit. We are getting to work on lots of projects at the same time. And of course, that opportunity just breeds a lot of new ideas, creativity and opportunity."

CONNECTED UNIVERSE

In that sense, *Firebreak* seems to be a side effect of a stronger, more independent Remedy than ever. Not only does it now have multiple games on the go at once, but this is also its first ever self-published game. Despite the shift of genre – not only from singleplayer to co-op, but also from third-person to first-person shooter – the game still slots into the existing lore. The

FIRST
LOOK

FBC of course stands for Federal Bureau of Control, and indeed *Firebreak* is set entirely within the Oldest House, the same sprawling office otherspace Jesse Faden found herself trapped in.

Now years into the Hiss invasion, the Bureau regularly sends out *Firebreak* teams of expendable office staff to deal with the endless supernatural crises that beset the House. That's where you and two of your friends come in, gearing up with an arsenal of bizarre weapons and equipment to take on waves of foes or die trying. Importantly, this isn't a massive live service game. It'll enjoy ongoing support but it's intended to be pick up and play – something easy to jump into with your friends and undemanding on your time.

"We wanted to make a game that people could access on their terms," says Kayatta. "That's not to say it's a casual thing or that we don't want people to get invested. Of course we want that. But we don't expect to dominate anyone's life."

SYSTEMS SHOCK

During my advance (hands-off) look at the game in action, what surprises me is how systems-driven it is. In leaning so far away from scripted sequences, *Firebreak* tips all the way into organic chaos. There seems to be almost an immersive sim-like design to it. Heat is a factor, for example, and the Hiss will actually get more effective as they get warmer – but if things get too warm, fires can break out and enemies can even spontaneously combust. Water douses flames, and it also heals you, via any source, but getting wet can make you cold, which slows you down.

Mission objectives play into that design. The one I get to see involves an infestation of sticky notes, which seem to not only be spreading across the complex but spawning strange creatures. The goal is disarmingly straightforward: destroy over 250,000 sticky notes, however you can. You can just point a machine gun at a pile of the yellow squares and fire away, but it's not very efficient. Creative thinking is better rewarded.

Set off the sprinklers over a big pile, and then blast the wet mess with an electricity gun, and they'll all fry at once – though make sure there aren't any damp allies standing nearby. Equally, fire will



THE HISS WILL ACTUALLY GET MORE EFFECTIVE AS THEY GET WARMER



PREVIEW

FBC: Firebreak



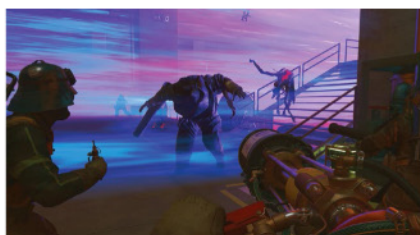
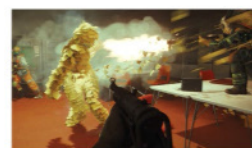
RIGHT: Join up with your squad, lock and load, then go kill foes or die trying.

BELOW: Get a haircut, hippy! And what did I say about sideburns!





Stinky Jeff having his third shower of the day.



quickly spread across the notes, but creates its own risks – not just burning the team, but potentially buffing the waves of Hiss with their warmth.

“We were never going to be able to build a replayable game off of [scripted sequences], as amazing as they are,” says Kayatta. “As much as I wish we could figure out some sort of procedural musical number or something, we didn’t quite crack that one yet! And so from that perspective, we came at it from a systems lens. Because systems, if you get them right, are sort of an engine that generates those moments. They’re not as big and grand and controlled, but they are really unique. So though you kind of lose something, you also gain something.”

The game’s strange selection of equipment looks set to provide plenty of opportunity to poke and prod at these systems. Just in the short section I was shown, I saw water cannons, lightning guns, leaf-blower sentry guns made out of office chairs, and an explosive piggy bank that unleashes a swirling storm of coins.

JOYFUL DISCOVERIES

Kayatta describes “joyful discoveries” and “funny moments” the internal team is still running into while playing with these systems. The game seems to take inspiration from the emergent silliness of games like *Helldivers 2* and *Deep Rock Galactic*, and certainly the footage I’m shown looks like chaotic fun. Every

moment there seems to be some kind of explosion going off, fire breaking out, or burst of electricity crackling across the screen. But it’s particularly hard to judge that kind of gameplay on sight, and I’m left all the more impatient to try the game for myself, to see how all this truly clicks together in play. In the meantime, as a long-time fan of Remedy’s singleplayer adventures, it’s hard not to be sceptical.

Breaking from tradition is all well and good, but with many of the studio’s core strengths set aside, is this set to be just a throwaway spin-off? And even if it turns out well, can it really have much of a lifespan in the crowded co-op multiplayer space? Those are the pessimistic questions, but at the same time just the existence of *Firebreak* gives fans reasons to be optimistic. A big, self-published spin-off developed by a new team separate from whatever the next big project is – that’s an exciting new step from a Remedy seemingly at the height of its powers. Dipping into other genres could open this connected universe up to new fans, and lead to even more exciting developments in the future.

And though this is in many ways a major departure, much of what I see is comfortingly familiar. As a sticky-note giant bursts up through the floor at the end of the level, looming over the team of office workers wielding guns made from improvised scientific equipment, I can’t help but think, “This is so Remedy.” There may not be any FMV or internal monologues, but *Firebreak* certainly looks creative, strange and unique enough to stand as a worthy addition to one of gaming’s most fascinating canons. *FBC: Firebreak* is scheduled for release in 2025.

Robin Valentine

**I SAW WATER CANNONS,
LIGHTNING GUNS, LEAF-
BLOWER SENTRY GUNS...**

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



Capt Tyler
Governor

Log Fleet Cargo Map Lore

Tuesday, November 21st 1724 10:54 PM
30/1100 95% Starving!
Crew Pay 30 in 5 days

112.57m 101.02m 181.65m

The Leaky Dingy

Taverns are where the community meet, here you can meet many interesting characters, expand your crew, or play a game of blackjack!

Blackjack

Leave Game

Dealer 16

Blackjack Pays 3-to-2
Dealer must draw to 16 and stand on all 17s
Insurance Pays 2-to-1

Net Laye Bust!

Capt Tyler 6

10000 Bet
Max Bet is 10,000 gold

Bartender
What can I get you?

NEED TO KNOW			
RELEASE Q3 2025	DEVELOPER Concept Games	PUBLISHER Concept Games	LINK s.team/a/2128430

SEVEN SEAS: ADVENTURES

Yo ho ho and a barrel of fun

There are loads of people out there pining for the golden age of *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, I'm certain of it. In the absence of another remake, we dig for treasure instead in open-world piratical games that take MicroProse's work as an inspiration, such as Concept Games' crowdfunded effort.

FIRST LOOK

The main issue with *Pirates!*, 21 years after its last release, is its repetitive nature. Seven Seas: Adventures attempts to rectify this with 37 different ports to visit, a set of unique starting conditions for your custom character that will affect the way they are received by society, and no dancing minigame.

Total War is also on the devs' list of inspirations, and with nine factions to battle for Caribbean supremacy the chances of pitched naval battles with lines of ships exchanging broadsides are high – though it's also possible to play the game as a peaceful trader or sit with a

foot in two worlds as a peaceful trader who also raids shipping and uses the proceeds to buy up cities.

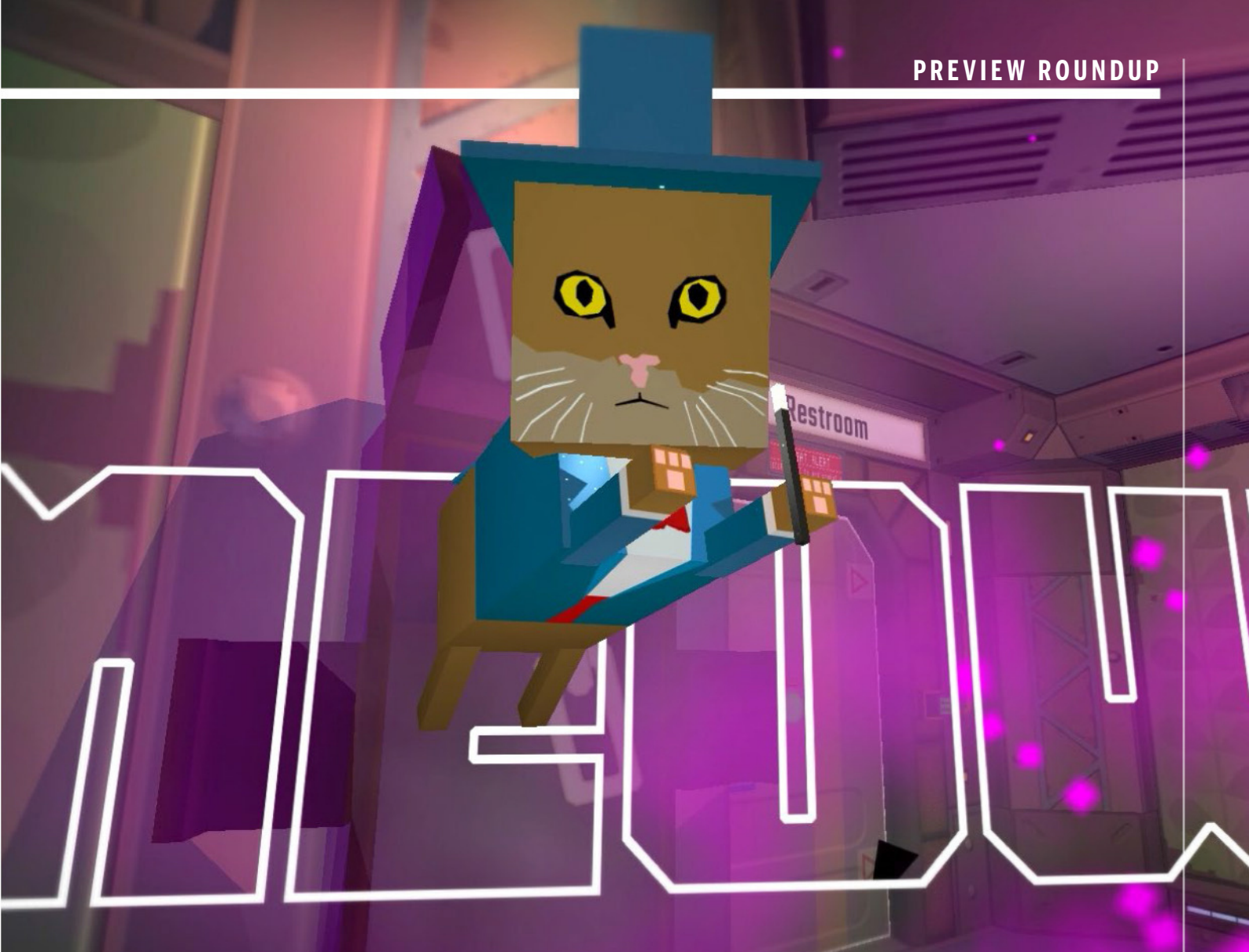
FLAG OF CONVENIENCE

In motion, it's a lovely looking game. The recent Steam demo limited players to the number of flags they can sail under, as well as professions such as navigator, farmer and musician, and this choice determines how the main quest plays out as well as which perks you get to help you along your way – though as starting conditions are randomised for each save, you never know what you're going to run into. Once you've chosen, you'll create a character portrait and design a flag before being dropped into hostile waters.

RESEMBLES PIRATES! IN THE WAY IT LOOKS THANKS TO ITS TOP-DOWN VIEW

The game definitely resembles *Pirates!* in the way it looks thanks to its top-down view of the sea, with a rich, almost hand-drawn presentation topped off by detailed weather systems, bright reflections from the waves, and colourful tropical beaches. Dock at a quay, and the town is ranged before you, with all the open-world exploration taking place out at sea. It's also possible to buy the buildings in a port for yourself, adding another source of income and opening up a management side to the game. Ports each come with different facilities, taverns to play blackjack in or buy drinks for your crew (or hire new members), churches that will share rumours for a price, and of course markets and warehouses to offload your booty. Buying low (or stealing) and selling high being very much the way to amass a fortune.

Seven Seas: Adventures has enormous potential beyond the nostalgia rush of its subject and presentation, and hopefully won't become buried treasure.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 30, 2025

DEVELOPER
Blendo Games

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

LINK
s.team/a/301280

SKIN DEEP

Cats in space with a human for company

More pirates, this time in space. *Skin Deep* comes from Blendo Games, the studio behind *Quadrilateral Cowboy* and the *Flotilla* games, and is a first-person shooter sort of immersive thing with cats and sneezing. More sneezing, now that I come to think of it, than I've ever seen in a game before.

The sneezing doesn't come from the cats, not from a cat allergy that would turn out to be a serious problem in this spacefaring culture. Despite the fact that the player character is clearly a human — we can see this from her reflection — and the space pirates seem to be too, as their very human-like heads come off when they die so that they can be reborn unless you find a way to stop it (flushing the head down the toilet works) the spaceship crew that you're tasked with rescuing is entirely feline. And also surely too small to operate the doors and switches dotted around the place.

AH-AH-AH-CHOO

Where the sneezing does make a difference is in the stealth and combat.

You'll spend a fair bit of time clambering around in the vents, and these are dusty. You can see it hanging in the air in front of you, but mostly you can see the effect it has on you via a 'sneeze' meter that slowly fills in these environments. A sudden ah-choo is going to attract the attention of nearby space pirates, but the nasal reflex can also be used to your advantage, such as when you throw pepper at the hapless guy guarding the ship's captain's cell. He breaks free with a resplendent MEOW!

PLAYED IT

You also have no shoes, and while this opportunity to introduce the tickling mechanic that stealth games have always been lacking has been passed over, it does mean that walking over broken glass is going to lead to injury, which you're going to have to find a way to heal. There are two levels available in the game's Steam demo, and the thought of playing the whole thing is hugely appealing.



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Relic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Relic Entertainment

LINK
s.team/a/3269230

EARTH VS MARS

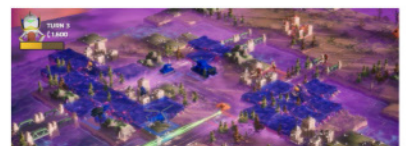
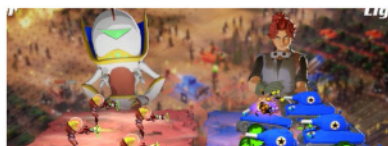
The chances of this were a million to one, they said

Company of Heroes dev Relic unveiled this species-blurring tactics game back in February to some consternation. How could the studio behind *CoH3* have made something so cartoony? Setting aside that one of the game's influences is *Advance Wars*, not noted for its gritty realism.

FIRST LOOK

In 2003 Relic released *Impossible Creatures* via Microsoft. It's a strategy game with a strong *Island of Doctor Moreau* seam running through it, as to create your armies you blend animals together to combine their traits. So creating a tiger with lobster parts gives you an armoured killing machine, while an electric eel and camel would produce something that can go for long periods without water and zap bad guys with electricity. Or possibly power a pump more reliably than a solar panel.

The idea has resurfaced in *Earth vs Mars*. It's Relic's first release following



its publishing independence from Sega, which perhaps explains the distance the studio is putting between it and its earlier work. Its turn-based rounds see attackers and defenders trundle around the map and face off in a very *Advance Wars* style, knocking lumps out of one another until the weaker side is dead.

DNAAAAAAAAAAY

The story goes that Martian forces have been secretly visiting Earth for decades, abducting both humans and animals. Now they've mounted a full-scale invasion, and the human resistance are using a device known as a Splice-O-Tron to combine animal DNA with that of human "volunteers" – and I'm not sure I like the way that word is put in scare

quotes in the press release – to create hybrid super-soldiers that can drive off the Martian menace alongside the usual tanks and jet fighters the militaries of Earth can muster. The invading forces come with flying saucers and hovering tanks, but they must have learned something from all those years spent abducting and probing poor rural unfortunates, and enemy units based on farm animals are surely a given.

This all has distinct *XCOM* vibes about it, and just like that game there's a full singleplayer campaign with online multiplayer, AI skirmish battles, and a map editor. Sadly it's not going to be Steam Deck compatible at launch, as anyone who remembers *Advance Wars'* domination of the Game Boy Advance tactics scene will know how much time can be lost to a portable wargame.

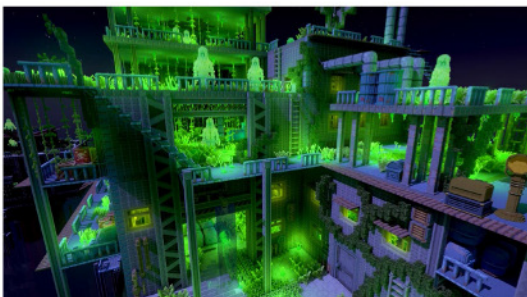
The idea of striking unseen from the forests with groups of squirrels, or flattening enemies with rhino troopers, is tempting. Whether the ultimate weapon to turn back the invaders turns out to be a microbe blended with a human remains to be seen.

MARTIAN FORCES HAVE BEEN SECRETLY VISITING EARTH FOR DECADES



VOXILE

Building a world,
brick by brick



Voxels were once supposed to be the future of PC games, and yet somehow polygons still endure. *Voxile* combines voxels and ray-tracing in a way that sounds like it could melt your graphics card if turned up to high enough settings, and as a result looks very much like a copy of *Minecraft* that fell

through a time portal from the year of our lord 2050.

Comparisons to Mojang's somewhat popular title are inevitable, as the world of *Voxile* is made of blocks and it's a survival game, but there's a lot more shooting going on among the beautifully lit cubes here. *Voxile* is more of an exploration and combat game, with damage numbers erupting from creatures' heads as you blast the voxels off them. There's a plot too, a tale of mysterious ooze that's transforming the terrain as it spreads across islands that differ in theme and in the game mechanics available on them.

PLAYED
IT

Voxile looks amazing in motion, and its world editor means we may one day see ray-traced creations to rival those of *Minecraft*.

RELEASE
Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
VoxRay Games, Inc.

PUBLISHER
VoxRay Games, Inc.

LINK
s.team/a/2283580

The art style, with its soft, painterly colours, makes for a unique-looking citybuilder.



AMBERSPIRE

Alien cities with a dose of randomness

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Lunar Division

PUBLISHER
Bithell Games

LINK
s.team/a/3350750

Science fantasy city-building sounds like a good time, and *Amberspire* has you managing populations

and dealing with factional rivalries on an alien moon, but with the addition of dice. These add a degree of uncertainty to proceedings, meaning

you won't know exactly how much of a resource a building will produce, what the conditions will be, or how these events will play out.



I HAVE WOKEN UP IN AN ABANDONED
BUILDING IN SEATTLE, A
CENTURIES-OLD VAMPIRE WHO HAS
BEEN IN A TORPOR FOR 100 YEARS.

WHO FORCED ME INTO
A SURPRISE SLUMBER?

HOW DID I GET TO SEATTLE?

AND WHY THE HECK AM I HEARING
ANOTHER VAMPIRE IN MY HEAD?

THESE TANTALISING QUESTIONS
ARE JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG
IN A GAME THAT UNEXPECTEDLY
FEELS LIKE A CLASSIC PULP
NOIR DETECTIVE YARN.

WELCOME TO **VAMPIRE: THE**
MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

By Fraser Brown



Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2

» *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*, from my double helping of the game's prologue, is very keen to let you embrace the power fantasy of being a supernatural predator, but it equally focuses on solving mysteries and crimes. Imagine splicing Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* with Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and you're close.

But let's jump back a bit to the first question you might be asking yourself: who am I? Unlike *Redemption* or the first *Bloodlines*, which kicked you into the World of Darkness as a vampire, this time we play as the Nomad, who picks the nom de guerre Phyre – a vampire celebrity who's not been forgotten despite these years of sleeping.

WAKEY WAKEY

Playing a character with so much power – even though you've lost much of it thanks to an as-of-yet unexplained ritual – and so much history is a very different experience. But developer The Chinese Room, you'll be glad to know, has not gone down the exposition dump route when it comes to introducing Phyre.

"[We're] deliberately leaving space for the player," says narrative director Ian Thomas. "So if we went, 'Here is your character, they're like this, they have done this, all of these things,' actually, in a way, it's not important that they know all that backstory – at least to start with, because we are dumping them into a new and unfamiliar situation."

Throughout the game you'll have chances to define your history, and that starts early on, when you describe a key moment from your past, and eventually reveal what vampire clan you belong to. But these moments are peppered throughout, letting you get a feeling for the character and the setting first, before you lock in their legacy. NPCs also play a role in filling in the blanks.

"How we show the status of the character is in other people's

reactions to that character," says Thomas. "And so rather than saying at the beginning, you're a legend, we build that by people's reactions to you. Then there's the power level, which I think would show pretty heavily very early on. The first time you accidentally punch a guy across a room, which I think is very different from the start of *Bloodlines 1*."

Even without the stereotypical amnesiac RPG hero conceit, Phyre will still be, at least initially, an enigma. And when they do talk about their past, maybe they're even lying. There's a lot of room for you to fill in your own version of this supernatural monster. They are yet another mystery you'll need to unravel.

To really hammer home how much of a detective romp *Bloodlines 2* is, you've got a literal detective stuck in your head. His name is Fabien and he is a delight. He's also a Malkavian – an innately insightful vampire clan with a gift for prophecy. Malkavians are often depicted as deranged, with the insights they glean fracturing their minds, but The Chinese Room has taken a different approach with Fabien, presenting him as a fairly put-together – if eccentric – detective.

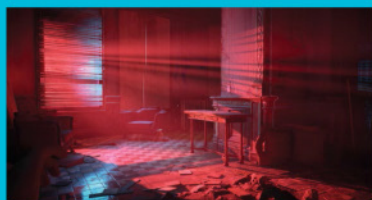
"It's part of how he is dealing with the Malkavian curse," says game director Alex Skidmore. "He's constructed this story he tells himself." The whip-smart detective is a persona he's able to hold onto, centring himself. And as a detective with plenty of knowledge about Seattle and the modern world, he's able to keep you heading in the right direction. Or is he?

"There are points in the story where there are things that Fabien will tell you that are clearly not true. But he believes them. And that's really interesting because then you start to question, because he's also your guide, what can I trust?"

Despite the popularity of the clan, there's been criticism levelled against the depiction of mental illness, with



YOU'LL HAVE
CHANCES TO
DEFINE YOUR
HISTORY, WHICH
STARTS WHEN YOU
DESCRIBE A KEY
MOMENT FROM
YOUR PAST



Even at night, Seattle is full of bright lights and colour.



PHYRE STARTER *The vampire clans of Bloodlines 2*



BANU HAQIM

They are assassins preying on other vampires, but the Banu Haqim see themselves as protectors and lawkeepers, stalking those who don't fit in with their convictions and personal ethics.



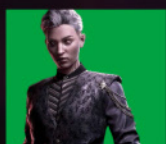
BRUJAH

A clan of scholarly warriors, radicals and rabble-rousers who in the modern era have a distinctly punk vibe. They like to hit things, but they might recite quotes from their favourite philosopher.



TREMERE

Blood mages who stole their vampiric gifts. The Tremere are learned and blood-obsessed, and can thus do incredible things with the vitae pumping through our veins.



VENTURE

The blue bloods of vampiric society. The Ventru use money and influence to keep other vampires in line, and think very highly of themselves. They are natural leaders and master manipulators.





WHO ARE YOU?

Crafting a protagonist

CHARACTER

Phyre isn't an amnesiac, but their past is still another mystery waiting to be unravelled, and also defined by players. Were they a warrior? A scholar? A wanderer? It's up to you.

POWERS

Phyre needs to drink blood to use their supernatural abilities, and human blood specifically to unlock abilities from other clans, and not all blood is equal. You'll need to be a picky drinker.

STYLE

Phyre's fashion is determined by their clan and progression, but if you're diligent you'll be able to unlock a pretty varied wardrobe, from elegant robes to grotty punk attire.

the schizophrenic tendencies of these vampires sometimes being played for laughs. They are wacky and weird, which is fine as a character trait, but not when you're presenting the symptoms of real mental illnesses. Fabien's depiction manages to avoid this. And while it's a more sensitive approach, it's also a practical one.

"What I find particularly interesting is that they are seeing the world through a different filter, through their own," says Thomas, "and there is this notion of sages or prophets and seeing visions, and in some cases, believing those visions. And there's also the Cassandra thing of, 'I believe this is true, and nobody else believes me'. What was less interesting about the more schizophrenic or scattered [approach] is it's very difficult to have a through-line of a viewpoint."

So Fabien is grounded in this world, and revels in it. He hasn't completely lost contact with his humanity, and he still finds joy in solving mysteries and engaging with people. Instead of a stereotype, with his traits treated like a traumatic affliction, Fabien sees the world with an almost childlike wonder.

Like Fabien, the vamps I'm introduced to once I escape the

RIGHT: It's gonna be a nightmare getting blood out of the baize.



aforementioned abandoned building and *Bloodlines 2*'s brisk tutorial feel like fleshed-out individuals rather than characters presenting their clans as monoliths. At the same time, players familiar with *Bloodlines* or the tabletop game should be able to still identify what clan they belong to and what approaches might work best when dealing with them.

MAKING FRENEMIES

So you've got the Brujah, the scholarly warriors of vampire society, who in the modern era are more likely to be tattooed bruisers, rebels and bikers. But the first one you meet, Benny, is Seattle's sheriff. He's gruff, tattooed, and itching for a fight, but in his formal role he's committed to law and order – to maintaining the all-important titular Masquerade.

Of all the vamps I meet in the prologue, Lou Graham is easily my favourite. She's also real. A century ago, she was a well-known brothel owner. In the game, she boasts about how there is a museum exhibit dedicated to her – another legit fact. I'm introduced to her shortly after she's dispatched some assassins. It's been a chaotic night, an attempted coup, and she's not pleased.

Everything about her exudes authority and calm confidence. She is, of course, a Ventrué – one of

VTM's bluebloods. But she's also got history, personal goals, secrets and personality quirks all of her own, which you'll need to learn about or take a guess at if you want to claim victory during your verbal jousts.

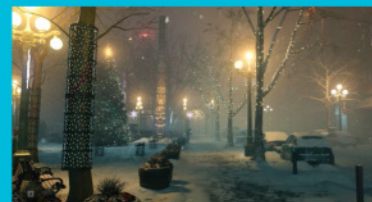
"It's one of those things where we didn't want to play it straight down the line, because that's kind of generic, so we tried to twist things every now and again," says art director Ben Matthews. "But of course, a big part of the remit was to understand at first glance, 'Oh, Benny's obviously a Brujah, like Lou is obviously Ventrué'. So we did spend quite a lot of time making sure that resonated with people."

Lou is the big kahuna. She used to be Seattle's prince, ruling the city by night as the chief representative of the Camarilla – *VTM*'s law-loving faction and the current vampiric authority in Seattle – but she made the unprecedented move to abdicate her throne and give it to her undead progeny. She still has all the influence of a prince, though, and chatting to her is like skipping through a pit of angry vipers, all of them wearing expensive jewellery.

As a Tremere, *VTM*'s geeky mages, we didn't get off on the right foot. A lot of vamps have it in for the Tremere, since they effectively stole the gift of vampirism. Thus, Lou spits



**SHE MADE THE
UNPRECEDENTED
MOVE TO
ABDICATE
HER THRONE
AND GIVE IT
TO HER
UNDEAD PROGENY**





out barbs like they're going out of style, commenting on my appearance, my smell, and just talking shit.

And fair play to Lou – she was dressed to the nines and I looked like I'd just rolled out of my coffin. Because I had. The character designs are incredibly potent, really emphasising, physically, a vampire's personality, or at least the one they present to the world.

"To be honest, this is the most exciting part of things," says lead character artist Keiko Kasai. "Once we get all these narratives, stories and backgrounds about these characters, Ben and I work closely together, and with other departments like the

rigging team and the animation team. We try to make it as unique as possible – to make sure that everyone is unique and different from one another. And we try to put more layers into them, giving them depth, giving them perspective, so that when people get to see them, they feel something about them."

Kasai wants us to peer into their souls when we meet a new vampire, through their design. So we can read into Lou's hair and pearls, and in the way she carries herself, sneering at you, daring you to annoy her.

Like all the conversations I had in *Bloodlines 2's* prologue, this chat was full of layers. My choice of clan put

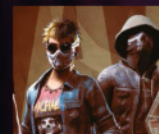
PHYRE STARTER

Two vampire clans of Bloodlines 2



CAMARILLA

- Conservative
- Paranoid
- Powerful
- Extremely snooty
- Absolutely not to be trusted



ANARCHS

- Rebellious
- Passionate
- Rough around the edges
- Underdogs
- Absolutely not to be trusted

TOP: Seattle's uncharacteristic heavy snow is a grim portent.



RIGHT: You can never trust anyone who chooses to wear a bow tie.





IF YOU'RE
VERY SINCERE
IN YOUR
DEALINGS WITH
LOU, SHE'LL COME
TO SEE YOU AS A
VERY GENUINE
PERSON

us at odds, but being an Elder vampire meant that we were able to talk like peers. I even got on her good side by playing into her ego, asking her questions about herself. Unlike most RPGs, where dialogue sequences allow you to ask questions without consequences, every word you utter in *Bloodlines 2* could have serious ramifications. Which I discovered when I probed too much, touched on a sensitive subject, and ended the meeting on a sour note.

BIG TALK

Dialogue really is one of the places where *Bloodlines 2* shines, not just because of the quality of the writing – though certainly in part due to that – but because of the way reputation works. People might know bits and pieces about Phyre, and react to things you then do in your new life in Seattle, so you do have a kind of global reputation, but how specific characters respond to that reputation depends on them.

More importantly, you have these personal relationships that develop – characters get to know you, and then expect you to act a certain way. If you're very sincere in your dealings with Lou, she'll come to see you as a very genuine person. So if you throw a bit of sarcasm into the conversation, she might take that at face value. Meanwhile, if you're snarky all the time, a moment of sincerity might be taken as a sarcastic joke, offending Lou. It's an incredibly cool, very naturalistic system.

"We ultimately want narrative exploration," says Skidmore. "So each of those dialogue trees is a kind of maze. So we didn't want people to sort of switch off and go, 'I'm looking for the good choice, or the Paragon choice'. Because the moment you do that, you're always going to press top right or whatever."

You might actually want to annoy Lou, or another vampire, pushing their buttons to make them slip up, perhaps, or maybe just because you

would rather have them as an enemy instead of a friend. "It's just a matter of like, would you rub elbows with Lou the right way?" says Kasai. "Or do you want to piss her off and find out the extent of her powers?"

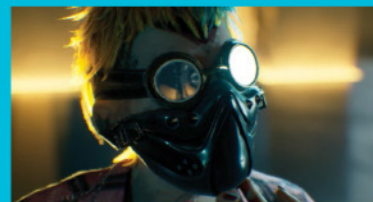
Bloodlines 2 is always dropping hints about characters – their power, motives, secrets. Sometimes it's overt – like a character telling you something about someone you're just about to meet. Other times it's done via environmental storytelling. You know Lou means business because her home is filled with dead assassins she's personally dispatched. "That was us trying to help you understand," says Skidmore. Even the music plays a role.

"Characters have thematic music that links to each of them," says lead sound designer Tessa Verplancke. "In the through-line of the story, we have hints at themes that you might not know yet, that hint towards story beats that will happen later. So as you go through it, you are actually getting told things, but you wouldn't know until you finish the game."

I definitely found myself thinking about the audio – the music, the voice acting, even the noise Phyre makes when they move – a lot, because it expresses so many details.

Phyre moves swiftly and subtly, and doesn't make much noise. "They're much more quiet," says Verplancke. "Their foley doesn't make as much noise because even without their powers, even when they're nerfed, they're way more silent than all the rest of them. You can feel how strong and powerful they are. Even if you can't use all of their powers, when they're climbing up things, they don't even need to have a little [sound of exertion] when they do it. So even in their movements, they've been made to be more powerful audibly, and you can subtly tell that nothing is really difficult for you."

And to be clear, Phyre really is incredibly powerful. Even before



Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2

unlocking their clan's powers Phyre is a beast. They can juggle enemies in the air with their attacks, make people explode with a spell, run and dodge like they're travelling at the speed of sound, and even glide so far they might as well be flying.

This extends to how Phyre talks. They are quiet but self-assured, speaking in a purr that's just about to become a growl.

VENGEFUL VAMP

"Essentially, Phyre has been insulted at the start of the game," says Thomas. "Somebody has bound Phyre and taken away their full Elder powers. So that lets us still give you something to aspire to. It still lets us have a sense of progression in the mechanics. But it also means that Phyre is really pissed off that somebody has insulted – all of these younger vampires, one of them or a group of them, have insulted and chained you. We always describe what we're doing during the recording with the actors: Phyre is always foot-forward. Phyre never sits back and watches everything happen, no matter which version you're on. And that's partly driven by that rage."

In the context of an American-set game, they also sound very Old World. They're from Constantinople, now Istanbul, and their accent and manner of speaking marks them as a newcomer and an outsider. So, as players, we have to figure out how to adapt to that. We're tough as hell, but we're dealing with a new situation in a place that's changed a lot.

This is also clear from the way *The Chinese Room* has built Seattle – a condensed version of the city, with lots of the most notable locations, always experienced at night. It is categorically not the type of place Phyre is used to. "The scale of the city, and just the look and tone of the city, everyone, everything's hostile," says Matthews.

Bloodlines 2's Seattle feels taller than it really is – imposing, in a way.

And even at night, it's shrouded in a colourful darkness. Street lights and signs burst out of the gloom. Their brightness hints at your enhanced vampiric senses, but they're also exaggerated to make you – a creature of darkness – feel ill at ease.

Phyre's status as an outsider is especially interesting given that, at some point after the prologue, they are given the role of Seattle's new sheriff. A taste of their old power and influence – but under the control of these New World vamps.

"I think it's fair to say that when you become sheriff, however you become sheriff, there's advantages and disadvantages for you as a character," says Thomas. "And are you going to support the Camarilla, or are you going to use the excuse of being sheriff to do other stuff?"

I'm running out of space and my head is filled with facts. Like, did you know that any vampires sporting tattoos have to keep reapplying them unless they got them before they died? But, I know what you want. You want to know if you can hook up with one of these bloodsuckers.

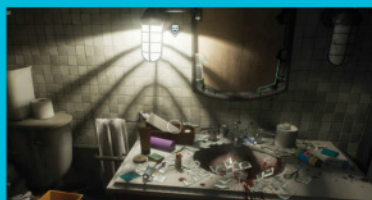
The answer is: kinda. "So there are some romantic options," says Skidmore. "But vampire romance isn't the same as human romance, and that's also an important plot point. So we have – this is probably awful – kind of romantic feeding."

Basically, you can feed on some named vampires, and it's meant to be a very intimate moment. This vampire is lowering their guard for you. But when you've got all these power-hungry predators in the mix, romance is bound to be a bit dicey.

So there you have it – yes, there's time for romance. Complicated romance. And once again I find myself struck by how reminiscent this is of my favourite hardboiled detective stories, with all their tricky romantic interludes. And after a day of swimming in conspiracies, I'm really looking forward to biting into the full thing. ■



**VAMPIRE
ROMANCE
ISN'T THE
SAME AS HUMAN
ROMANCE, AND
THAT'S ALSO AN
IMPORTANT
PLOT POINT**





PHYRE

Fresh blood. Kindred blood.

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE

How I spent my time in Bloodlines 2

50%
Figuring out how to make Lou Graham like me.



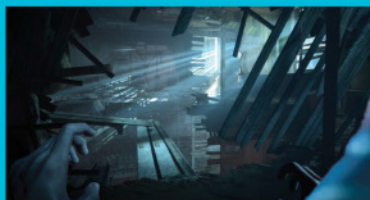
20%
Bloodshed.

20%
Chasing down leads with my detective BFF.

5%
Changing my hairstyle.

5%
Clambering up drainpipes.

ABOVE: Lou has been having some fun.



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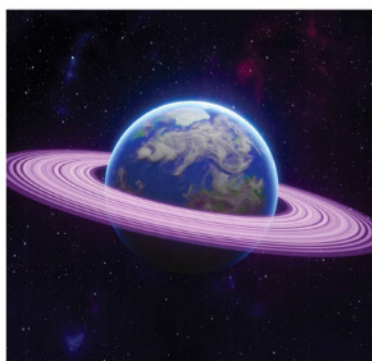
GUIDE *to the* GALAXY

Revenge of the Savage Planet

A hitchhiker's guide to
Racoon Logic's planet-
hopping, co-op trolling,
Metroidvania mission

REVENGE OF THE SAVAGE PLANET

By Phil Iwaniuk



Quasadron IX

A free-runner's nirvana chasms...

Welcome, travellers. Sorry to hear about that whole being made redundant and dumped out in the furthest reaches of space thing. But look on the bright side – your former employer Kindred Aerospace probably isn't even as good as the 'Fourth best space exploration company' status it likes to brag about. And now you're free of its corporate clutches, you've got some time on your hands for a heck of a gap year.

It's the perfect opportunity to enjoy the picturesque tundra, distinctive floating rock formation and plentiful fatal drops of Quasadron IX. After exploring its many floating islands, where they can find a vantage point to get some Instagram snaps of the planet's famous pink gaseous rings up in the sky, most tourists like to head to the central mesa. Food and drinks establishments are hard to find here,

so many travellers are forced to rely on the harvestable crafting materials found on Quasadron IX in order to sustain themselves. It may be lacking a Nando's or public toilets, but with several hours of life-threatening battles against the local wildlife and plant population in order to harvest materials, most visitors can obtain enough to deck out their own capsule with some creature comforts.

"That one's sort of been our favourite," says studio co-founder and creative director Alex Hutchinson. "It has lots of floating islands. It's very sort of cliché sci-fi with lots of vertical movement." There's hidden depth in all that verticality, too: "All planets have teleporters to the fifth world, [SLAPPI'S Den of Fun]... we treat it almost like legends." However, given that you're exploring *Revenge of the Savage Planet* in co-op, and have numerous opportunities for trolling each other, signs of intelligent life should stick out like a sore thumb.

PLANET STATS

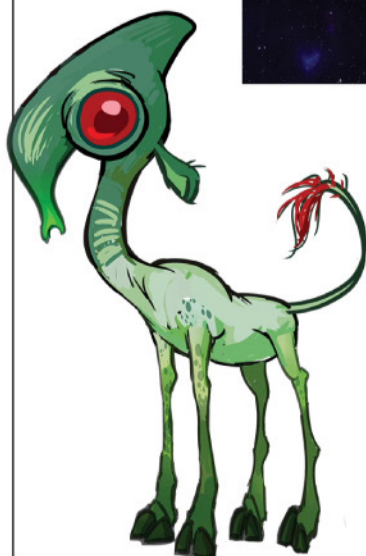
CLASSIFICATION
Ringed planet

SIZE/MASS
Super-Earth

ATMOSPHERE
Tense

'GRAM-WORTHY?
Yes, but snap from a safe footing

HOSPITABLE RATING
2/10

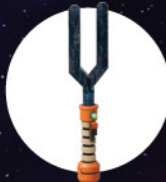


TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Essential hand luggage on your journey



EKO THE DRONE
Loudmouthed robotic helper. Means well – or does it?



MAG FORK
Pull up mountains from the ground, and use rocks as projectiles.



PROTON WHIP
Grapple onto ledges, whip enemies off them.



GOO CANNON (POWER HOSE)
Make your environment super slippery.



FABULOUS FAUNA

Savannah Eraffe

If witnessing the majesty of this sleepy giraffe with vitiligo isn't worth making the trip for, then what is? Note: the local tourism board advises against feeding, petting or looking at them.

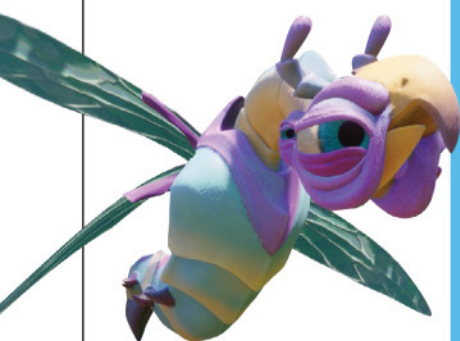
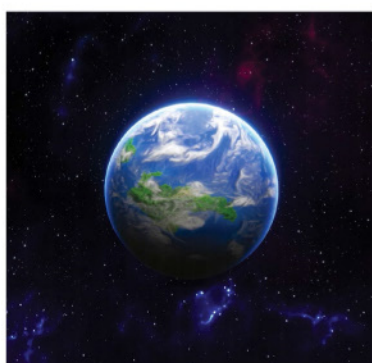


FANTASTIC FLORA

Quasadron cliffs

The frequent sheer drops on this planet are a great chance to refine your skills with the all-new tools and moves, including sliding, whipping and grappling your way around.

FIND A VANTAGE POINT
TO GET SOME SNAPS OF
THE PLANET'S FAMOUS
PINK GASEOUS RINGS



PLANET STATS

CLASSIFICATION
Earth analogue

SIZE/MASS
Sub-Earth

ATMOSPHERE
A bit too humid

'GRAM-WORTHY?
Only when wearing
insect repellent

HOSPITABLE RATING
3/10

Stellaris Prime

The host with the moist

When you've been floating through the featureless vacuum of space for a while, everyone starts to crave the same thing from their next vacation destination: a humid swamp full of insects. Welcome to Stellaris Prime, home of the famous New Florida, where the bugs are as plentiful as the unsafe drinking water and the needle-sharp cacti.

How to sum up the experience in a word? "Moist," says art director Erick Bilodeau. "It's a tropical kind of planet... there's lots of cacti and various sorts of desert oases as well." The scenery here can be stunning, especially if you've just spent several weeks on the barren desert planet of Xephyr. But tourists here report that they're rarely able to pause and take in the spectacular views, on account of the local wildlife.

Expanding to multiple planets rather than just one in *Journey to the*

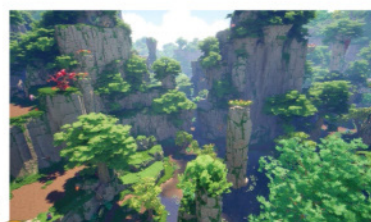
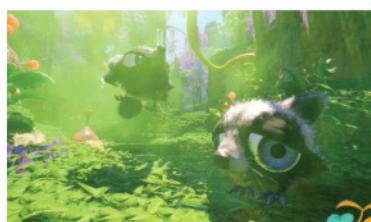
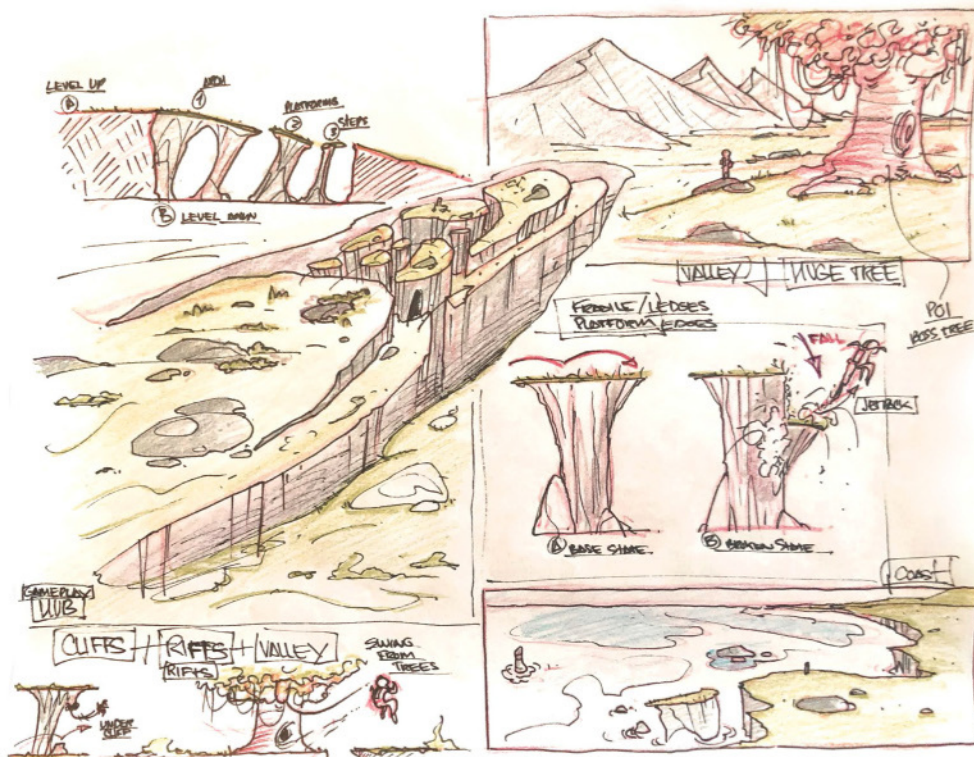
Savage Planet gave Raccoon Logic the chance to vary not just the geography, but to build distinct ecosystems for each. Since Stellaris Prime has a lot of swamps, that brings a certain kind of life form. "The creatures on this planet are a bit more insect-like," says Bilodeau. "But there's no creature specific to a planet, usually."

Although it may look like familiar old Earth from a distance, the indigenous risks of Stellaris Prime mean exploring with a co-op companion is advised. Just be careful with the new Goo Gun. "There's three types of goo, says Hutchinson, "all of which have various properties. Green goo is slippery, but also highly flammable. Fero goo is conductive so you can collect electrical sources and power things up. Then there's this halfway between lava and hot sauce burning goo, which is, you know, highly flammable. Um. And the goal is to get the player to use those in a situation that's a risk, and therefore accidentally do it to their partner."



Fecal Beetle

Insectoid specimens are rife here due to the warm and wet conditions. If one of these charges you, pop off some green goo at it and it'll lose its balance in the slippery mess.



1 The variety of plant life on this tropical planet is spectacular. Please don't take any cuttings home.

2 On ramps like this, some green goo will stop nearby creatures from climbing up to you.

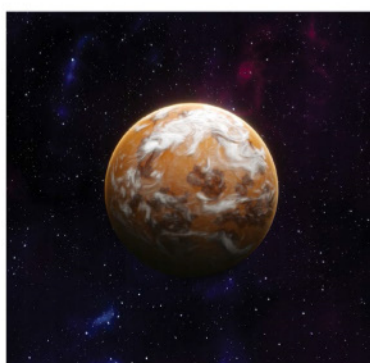
EXPLORING WITH A CO-OP COMPANION IS ADVISED



New Florida everglades

The local government assures travellers the water is safe to drink, but may cause, sickness, gastric disturbance, death, or more serious side effects.

3 Rumours circulate of a vast cave network below the swamps. Be sure to bring a torch.



Xephyr

It's a dry heat

In stark contrast to Quasadron IX's cliffs and Stellaris Prime's swamps, Xephyr is the ultimate destination for Tatooine natives, Frank Herbert fans and anyone looking to work up a base tan. The first clues about its climate are evident from orbit – like all the most desirable interplanetary getaways, it's an arid brown sphere full of hot, angry creatures.

"It's a desert planet," says Bilodeau, "which is a trope to all that desert sci-fi like [Star Wars'] Tatooine and Dune's Arrakis." The perfect place to get moody holiday snaps of cacti and sandstorms while the numerous bites you suffered in New Florida scab over. There's little in the way of restaurants here, but tourists will be delighted by the way the desert's secrets unfold as their armoury of tools and traversal methods expands. "We introduce new challenges or new

mechanics on each planet," says Bilodeau. "So you discover them linearly, but then since our structure is like a Metroidvania, you backtrack and [find new ways to interact] on a planet." "We sort of have you finish half of each planet the first time," says Hutchinson, "then later you can go back and do the other half."

An inhospitable desert it may be, but seasoned travellers will be pleased to find a lack of the usual empty map space that's prevalent in modern virtual tourism. "The planets meant we could do a clean shift every time," says Hutchinson. "In lots of the games we worked on in the past, there's a lot of dead space, just loads of art assets, and that's very expensive. There's still only 30 of us here. People who work on the actual world, I think we're four."

A vast desert planet that feels more detail-rich than an open-world map, and one that's hand-crafted by a small team – truly a modern wonder of the known galaxy.

PLANET STATS

CLASSIFICATION
Desert planet

SIZE/MASS
Mega-Earth

ATMOSPHERE
Punishingly dry

'GRAM WORTHY?
If your followers are Dune fans

HOSPITABLE RATING
1/10





Online dating isn't what it used to be.



FABULOUS
FAUNA

Vaperon

Our Xephyr holiday reps were quick to inform us that these predators are reluctant to pose for selfies with visiting sightseers. Local Grabgrubs are slightly more amenable to photography.



FANTASTIC
FLORA

Cactus Valley

The famed Cactus Valley is an essential addition to any visitor's itinerary, with the minor caveat that falling into said valley is quite likely to result in being speared by the deadly spines of said cacti.

TIGHT FIVE

Making humour work in interactive media



**NOÉMIE
L'ÉCUYER**

Veteran producer on Raccoon Logic's knack for laughs.

It's not easy to make comedy in games. How do you do it?

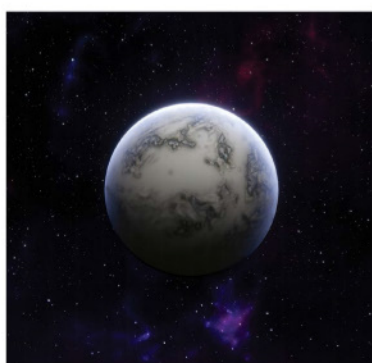
We're really transparent about who we are as a team. So when we recruit, [we tell them] this is what we do. This is the type of humour we have in the game. And this is, you know what we want to achieve. We also added it into our daily production life. So people pitch a lot of ideas and we have fun doing it. We go to meetings and we let humour be part of the process.

As a smaller studio, is it tempting to over-stretch yourselves, given the speed of iteration that new tools allow?

Well, we do it anyway! When we first started and we imagined, for example, the creatures for each of the planets. We had big ambition, 'Let's make all this variety of creatures for all the planets,' but we said in the end, 'OK, so what can we really produce in the amount of time that we have?'"

**TOURISTS WILL BE DELIGHTED
BY THE WAY THE DESERT'S
SECRETS UNFOLD**





PLANET STATS

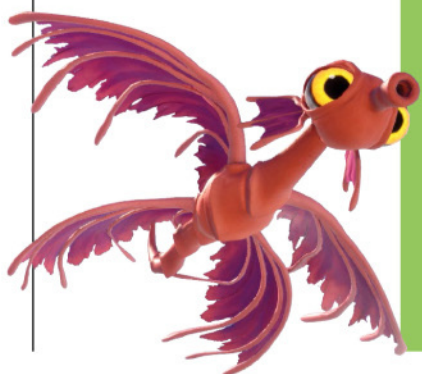
CLASSIFICATION
Ice giant

SIZE/MASS
Mega-Earth

ATMOSPHERE
Breath in the air

'GRAM-WORTHY?
It could really blow up

HOSPITABLE RATING
-5/10



Zenithian Rift

Bring the SPF and the thermals

Ice and fire rarely meet in nature, for reasons that the best minds at Kindred Aerospace have yet to establish.

However once place they do convene is on Zenithian Rift, a planet of contrasts, where you're just as likely to be immolated and have your remains lost to the flow of molten rock as you are to succumb to sub-zero temperatures and petrify solid out in the deadly winds. Shall we book you in for, say, 14 nights?

While there, you'll have the chance to take in tourist traps such as Brrrt's Frozen Grotto, an underground cave network formed within the ice, Chikit's Pools, where volcanic gases warm the water to create a gorgeous coral reef, and the Summit of Ruin – recommended for expert hikers only due to the toxic gases, massive drops, aggressive wildlife and critical lack of cafés and profiteroles.

Much of the co-op interplay's about using your tools to enact different states on your environment, but here the fiery and frozen bits are ready-made. That's not to say you can't use your tools to make Zenithian Rift even more difficult for each other. "It's a pretty chaotic game," says Bilodeau. "So when you have two players, it just creates more damage."

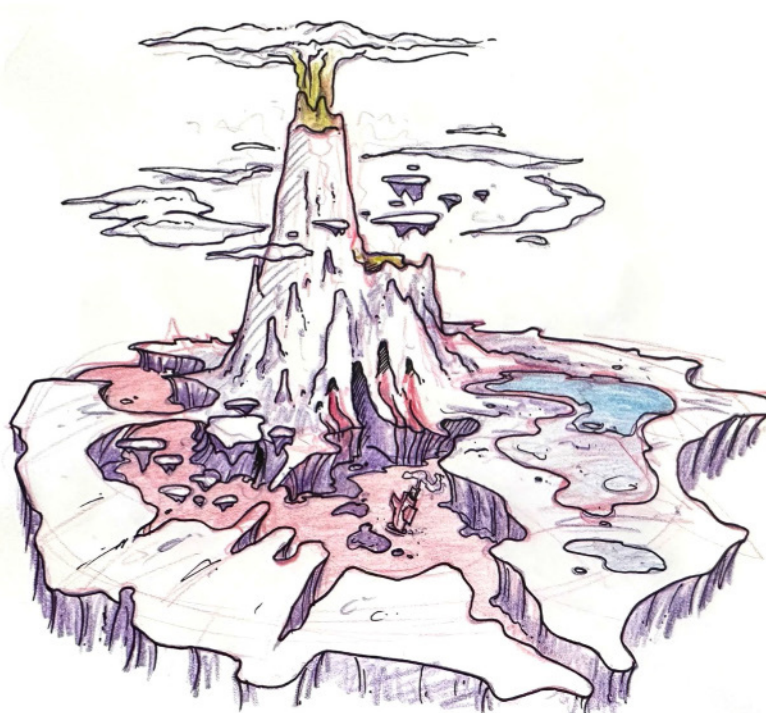
"I always see the tech and players as a chaos magnifier," says Hutchinson. "On *Army of Two* we had set mechanics, where I had to snipe something at the exact moment that you hit something and it started to feel very constraining to me, and not fun for the player. I think games like *Left 4 Dead* were more fun for just letting you do what you want" It's true what they say – the friends you make while travelling really are special bonds. In this case, bonds forged by constantly igniting each other or greasing each other's paths forwards for a slapstick fall.



FABULOUS
FAUNA

Crusher

You might not think a giant crustacean would be suited to a planet whose surface is covered in snow. The Crusher makes a compelling counterargument by leathering you with its claws.



Activities include mining, but no striking.

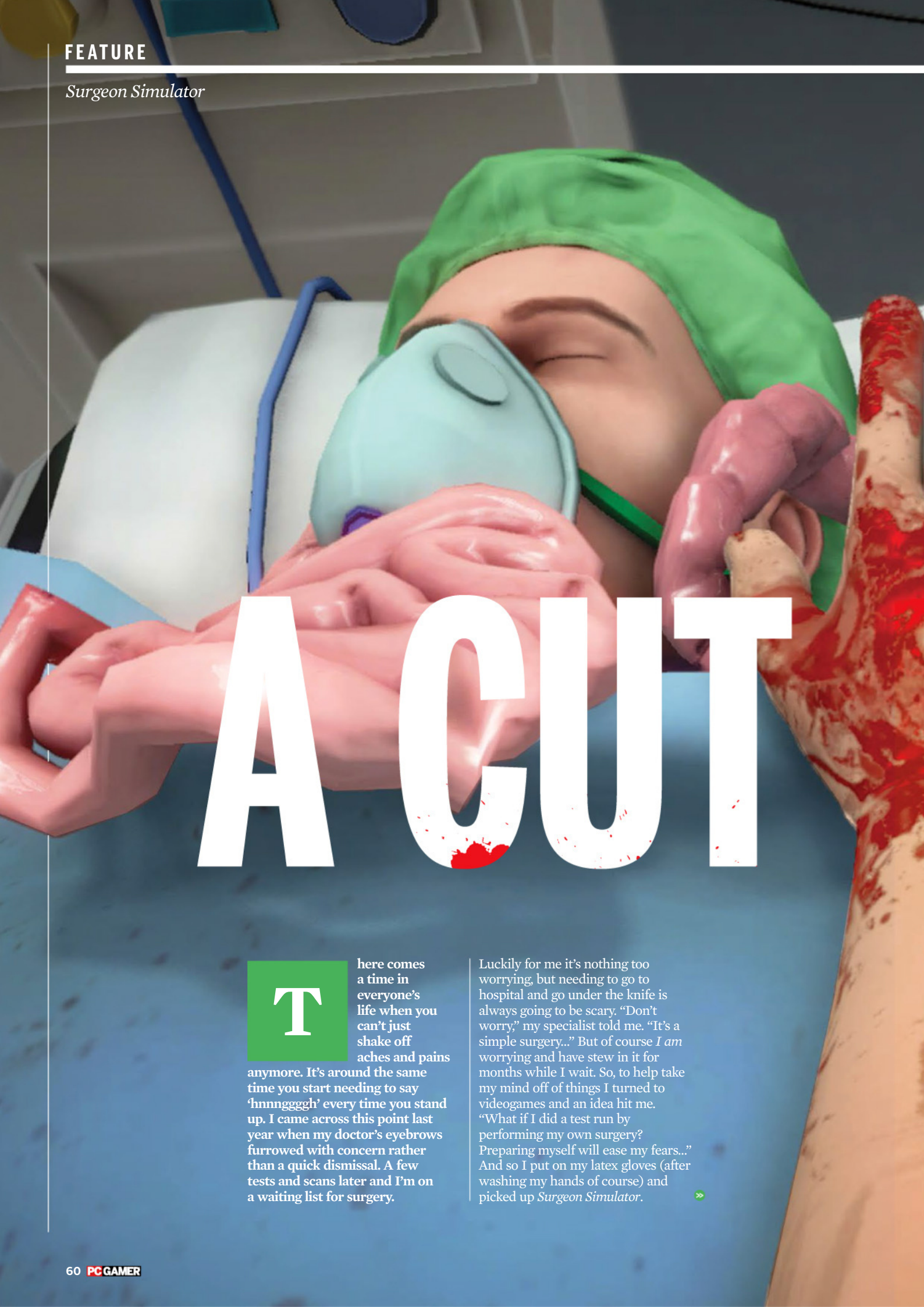


FANTASTIC
FLORA

Fungal Maw

Step beneath the surface where the volcanic activity warms the environment and you'll find a thriving community of... actually pretty hostile mushrooms. Still, at least you're not freezing to death.

**MUCH OF THE CO-OP
INTERPLAY'S ABOUT USING
YOUR TOOLS TO ENACT
DIFFERENT STATES**



A CUT

There comes a time in everyone's life when you can't just shake off aches and pains anymore. It's around the same time you start needing to say 'hnnnggggh' every time you stand up. I came across this point last year when my doctor's eyebrows furrowed with concern rather than a quick dismissal. A few tests and scans later and I'm on a waiting list for surgery.

Luckily for me it's nothing too worrying, but needing to go to hospital and go under the knife is always going to be scary. "Don't worry," my specialist told me. "It's a simple surgery..." But of course *I am* worrying and have stew in it for months while I wait. So, to help take my mind off of things I turned to videogames and an idea hit me. "What if I did a test run by performing my own surgery? Preparing myself will ease my fears..." And so I put on my latex gloves (after washing my hands of course) and picked up *Surgeon Simulator*. >>

ABOVE

Performing
my own
surgery in
**SURGEON
SIMULATOR**

By Daniella Lucas

Surgeon Simulator

It's been almost 12 years since Bossa Studios brought medical mishaps to the world with the opportunity to get your hands stuck into a comically grotesque world of surgery. Taking on the role of a surgeon, you need to control their hand one finger at a time to pick up the right tools to free organs from chest cavities before your patient, Bob, bleeds out on the table. Bossa has done a follow up game, *Surgeon Simulator 2*, that homes in on the chaos of the process and ups the ante by adding co-op and more challenges in the operating theatres, but the first game offers the purer experience I need to emulate my own surgery.

Luckily for Bob he doesn't have ovaries like I do so I have to make do and opt for the closest comparable organs I can – the kidneys. Both come in pairs, can cause unexpected pains on a semi regular basis, and both are hidden behind the spaghetti that makes up the intestines. In real life I'm having a dermoid cyst the size of an orange cut from one ovary as well as some misbehaving tubing removed, but Bob needs a full on swapsies with a transplant.

Before surgery can begin there's a lot of prep work involved. For me that involves seeing lots of specialists and lying down in a big, loud tube for 30 minutes to get an MRI. Thankfully I have 'no concerning features' but I am told that a dermoid is one of those freaky things that can grow hair, teeth and even eyeballs inside of it. It feels appropriately grotesque for a slapstick medical game. I'm placed on a waiting list and given how

understaffed and underfunded the NHS is I have zero idea when I'll have it removed. Meanwhile, Bob doesn't need a waiting list.

Usually, a kidney transplant will mean a long wait for a suitable donor and months of dialysis, but Bob moves straight to the front of the queue with two, healthy red virtual kidneys waiting for him in a coolbox. The only prep I need to do for his surgery is figuring out how to control my hand well enough to make an incision. While he gets ready for the operation I practice at my desk, at first learning how to pick up a mug. With individual finger control you'd think you'd be able to delicately lift things but instead all I'm capable of is mashing my sausage fingers around the cup like a baby holding a spoon for the first time. Once I've got that down I move onto something more delicate – a pen. I still have a fist grip going on, but I get the hang of manoeuvring myself enough to scribble on a pad of paper nearby. With my prep completed it's time to step into theatre. I hope we have a good anaesthesiologist.

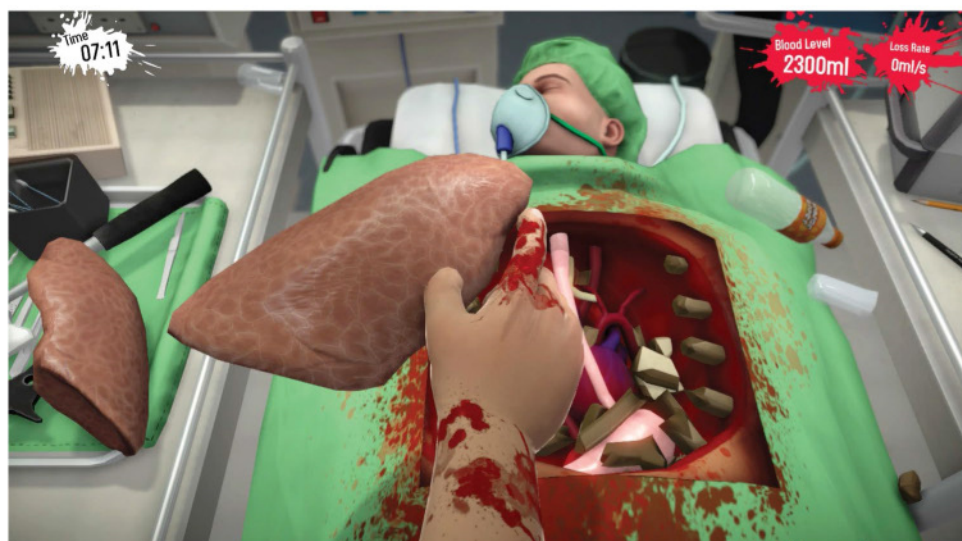
UNDER PRESSURE

First things first, I need to check on the patient and practice my bedside manner. The doctors and nurses I've met on my journey so far have all been lovely despite the huge amount of pressure they're under, so I want to make sure I show the same level of care. I do the closest thing to a reassuring shoulder pat I can and end up slapping Bob in the face. This doesn't bode well.



Next I get my workspace organised and take stock of my tools. Scalpels? Check. Kidney knife? Check. Hammer? Uh... check? I also have plenty of swabs, scissors and some drugs on standby if anything goes wrong. It's good to be prepared for anything in a surgical situation, although the simplicity and barbarism of some of the tools isn't exactly reassuring when it comes to the real thing. I need to be professional for Bob's sake, though, so it's time to lift the cloth, grab a scalpel and get stuck in.

I'm immediately taken aback by how squiggly everything is in the chest cavity. There are so many bends in the intestines that I have no idea where to cut so I lower my hand in, jiggle it about a bit and hope for the best. Blood starts spurting out almost immediately so I know I'm at least cutting something even if the game isn't really showing it. It feels like a monumental effort just to get my hand in vaguely the right spot, let alone making any kind of exact cut. I never knew I could be so bad at





TOOLED UP

The best equipment for any surgery



KIDNEY KNIFE

A robust blade perfect for cutting organs before removing them.



NEEDLE

Full of the medicine you need to stop the bleeding. Just don't prick yourself.



SAW

If bones get in the way you need something heavy duty to get through.



HAMMER

If you whack someone maybe they'll turn on and off again.

moving my own hands and I'm thankful that real surgeons have to go through years of study and specialisation before being allowed to play with anyone's belly noodles.

Somehow I manage to cut the large intestine in the lower right and a tube flops free. It's not enough to get it out, but after some more waving about in the upper left section it loosens up and I'm able to pull it out like a pink, wet ferret as it somehow wriggles in my hand. Unfortunately this has caused Bob to start bleeding out at an alarming rate, and in a rush to fix the problem I immediately drop the digestive organ on Bob's chest to get it out of the way and make a beeline for the green needle full of blood-stopping medicine. It slides down his chest until it hangs limply across his neck to give him a fetching meat scarf, but there's no time for fashion critique as there's a life to save.

I close my hand around the needle and attempt to angle my wrist to angle it towards Bob. Instead I bend it too far and end up poking my own

arm and the drugs flow into my body. My vision starts to blur and bounce around the screen with colours I've never seen before while Bob continues to bleed out on the table. Somehow I manage to compose myself enough to share a dose of the medicine with him and slow the bleeding. He's safe, for now, but my brain is still swaying around the room. I can't leave him like this so I have no choice but to power through. I'm sure it's totally fine.

With a few more organ layers to go through before I reach his kidneys I pick up a bigger knife this time – one with a handle that looks like a kidney so it's got to be the correct tool for the job, right? I dive back in and come back out with a handful of liver rather than small intestine. It's not what I was expecting, but given my current condition and the fact that I was going to have to move it anyway, I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself. It also gets chucked onto his chest but rolls off and gets wedged between the table and a cart full of equipment.

ABOVE: "Wait a minute, where's my watch?!"

FAR LEFT: Bob made a decision all PC gamers have considered at one time or other: selling a kidney in order to buy an Nvidia GeForce RTX 5090.



SOMEBODY CALL A DOCTOR

In the mood for more trauma? These hospital games will cure what ails you



Two Point Hospital

This hospital sim is currently one of the best available and sees you managing a whole facility rather than just surgery. Design your own medical facility to help cure people of a range of comedy ailments.



Surgeon Simulator 2

The follow up to the original, this sequel still has plenty of surgical malpractice but there's more to do in the room surrounding Bob. You'll need to navigate challenges, but at least you'll be able to do it co-op.



Theme Hospital

The original medical sim is a classic and helped inspire *Surgeon Simulator*. It's hard to find as it's not on Steam, but you can get it on GOG and is usually on sale. It's worth picking up if you want a history lesson on the genre.



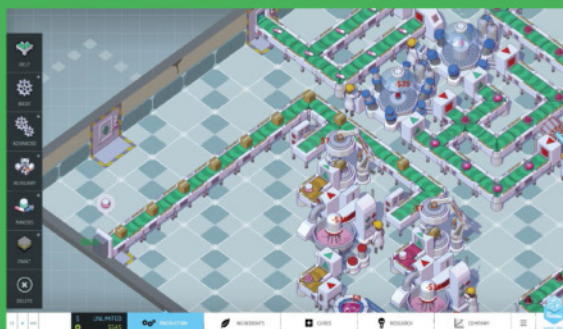
Project Hospital

A much more realistic take on the hospital sim genre, you play as a crisis manager helping to rebuild hospitals and diagnose patients. With loads of DLC the game is huge and well suited to those looking to get lost in the medical world.



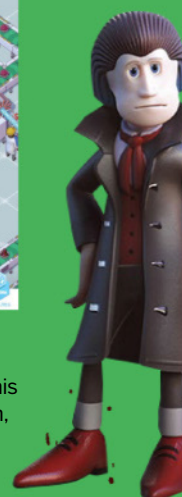
Plague Inc

OK, so this one is more on the bad side of medicine rather than the curing side, but working on spreading your disease and how it infects people is part of the process. I just hope you don't join me in my operating room.



Big Pharma

Ever want to make medicine rather than just use it? Then this is the game for you! Part logic puzzle and part business sim, you'll need to weigh up your profits and your ethics. Maybe keep an eye over your shoulder if you play this one.



Unluckily Bob starts bleeding profusely again, and in my drugged up state I end up dropping the needle somewhere on the floor so there's no hope of stopping the blood this time. I make the bold decision to carry on and just go as fast as I can to get the new kidneys in and pray that this will 'complete' the surgery before he runs out of blood and he'll be fine. I'm sure the same is true of the real thing too and you don't need to put everything back in again...

I've lost my fancy knife now and the scalpels are all over the place so I break out the big guns and go for the saw to hack away at the small intestine. I only need a small cut to get it out so it should work. However I get stuck as no matter how much I churn his innards they just won't break off, so he bleeds out on the table and I fail. Oh dear. Surgery is not as simple as I was told.

Uh, do surgeons get do-overs? I have two ovaries, so that means two attempts, right? ...Right? Thankfully for me there is always another Bob to

operate on, and I'm just going to have to hope that my real surgeons aren't as cavalier with their drug-taking and manage to perform mine in one go.

My second go around is much smoother now that I've had some 'training,' and Bob seems fine with the fact I've had to operate again. The large intestine comes away without too much bloodshed. Everything is under control... until I reach the small digestive tangle again. Luckily I've managed to hold onto the kidney blade by being careful when putting my instruments back down so I'm able to cut it free and yank it out. Finally I'm able to see Bob's kidneys!

There is one minor problem though... in the process of pulling out his innards I've lost my watch and it's slipped inside his chest cavity.

I might be able to see his wee-beans, but that doesn't mean I can get them out yet – his stomach is blocking the way. It sure is a lot of work involved just to deal with one little organ hiding away at the back. Luckily it's fairly easy to remove and

I add it to the meat pile by his head before getting to finally start the job I came here to do. The kidneys are surprisingly firm despite the narrow tubing and the first comes away after a little heavy poking. Bob's blood count is getting low now so I have to move quickly.

KIDNEY BEANS

The fresh set of kidneys are a lovely bright red and are safely nestled on ice in a coolbox. I try to delicately remove the left one but knock the right and it almost tumbles away but thankfully catches on the edge. I drop it into the now empty chest hole and watch it roll down instead of stay nicely in spot. Shit. With blood running out I decide to get the other one in there as fast as I can and correct the positioning later. I have the hang of cutting now even if my accuracy and form have plenty of room for improvement, so the second one is even quicker and this time it falls mostly in place.

Bob's blood count is dropping even faster now and I've lost the needle I need to slow it down underneath a pile of scalpels and glass beakers on the floor. All I need to do is poke the left one into place. I don't have anything blunt so I push it along with the flat side of my knife and as it rolls into the right spot my work here is done. Now that Bob has new kidneys he is good to go. There's no need to connect them or put all of those other pesky organs back in, he has

BELOW: Organs shmorgans, Bob will be fine, I'm sure.



THERE'S NO NEED TO CONNECT THEM OR PUT ALL OF THOSE OTHER PESKY ORGANS BACK IN

everything he needs now that he can have a healthy wee again.

This process has been a lot harder and more harrowing than I expected. I'm surprised by just how much meat you have to get past just to reach the organs you need. I'm glad I did it – I now appreciate just how much work and training must go into being a surgeon, and while the 'simplicity' of the process hasn't exactly left me reassured, at least I know I'll be in more capable hands than my own. ■

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother*, *Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong*, *ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant*, *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World*, *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, *Redfall*, *Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends*, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World*, *Skull and Bones*, *Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4*, *Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring*, *Factorio*, *Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Minecraft*, *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Stab happy

If you're a fan of stabbing things with sharp blades and the exotic, far-eastern beauty of Japan, then you're well served in this month's reviews section, with both *Rise of the Ronin* and *Assassin's Creed Shadows* rated. Unfortunately, though, these games end up with wildly differing scores, and that reason is largely down to the quality of their PC ports.

Assassin's Creed Shadows is, from a technical point of view, a triumph. Ubisoft's Anvil engine drips with next-gen real-time ray-traced global illuminated gorgeousness. Stunning. *Rise of the Ronin*, though, has been a broken, unoptimised mess on PC for our reviewer, which is a damn shame as from a gameplay perspective it is strong. But that's no good if the game is barely playable at times, is it? Disappointing.

R. Jones

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**LET US KNOW
 WHAT YOU THINK**
 Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's unagi-scoffing reviewers...



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Fartkour

Currently playing
*Assassin's Creed
Shadows*

This month
Got the drop on
console gamers by
using his deadly ass.



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Clubbing sassanachs

Currently playing
Atomfall

This month
Started a cult where
his dog, Cosmo, is the
almighty leader. He's
gone barking mad!



MOLLIE TAYLOR
Specialist in
Starting fires

Currently playing
Two Point Museum

This month
Found a collection of
Leisure Suit Larry
games, and curated
them appropriately.



SEAN MARTIN
Specialist in
Going berserk

Currently playing
*The First Berserker:
Khazan*

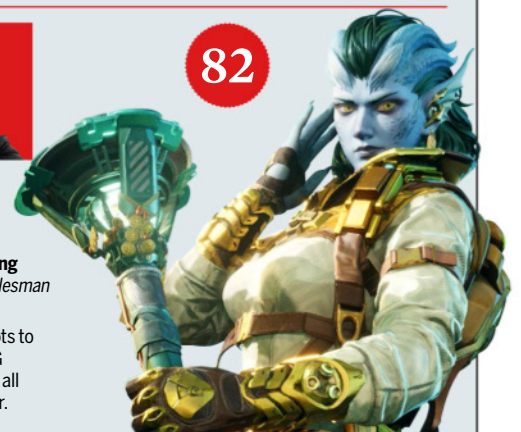
This month
Ran around the PCG
office shirtless. We've
told him about that.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Capitalism

Currently playing
Gravity Boots Salesman

This month
Sold gravity boots to
everyone in PCG
Towers. We now all
work on the floor.



REVIEW

Assassin's Creed Shadows



DUELING BLADES

Does **ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS** deliver a clean one-cut kill?

As analysts ready their takes on what *Shadows* means for the future of the industry's old giants and their huge open-world games, I've got a simpler question to answer: is *Shadows* fun? I'm so glad that one is an easy yes. *Shadows* is some of the most fun I've had with a stealth game in a decade, and impressively, it also has the best, stickiest combat this series has seen. When I'm Naoe, ghosting past samurai by rooftop or shadow, or I'm Yasuke, charging through a castle gate and nailing every perfect block against a warrior monk, *Shadows* is peak *Assassin's Creed*.

But it's not all neck stabs and decapitation by katana. *Shadows* is massive – I'm knocking at the door of 50 hours having completed the main story and a chunk of side stuff – but its bloated map of breathtaking castles, unending temples, quaint villages and gorgeous countryside is much wider than it is deep. In terms of stealth and action, *Shadows* is a successful return to what made early *Assassin's Creed* great, but it also drags along baggage from *Origins*, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*. It's got quests, companions, and dialogue options clearly designed to resemble a BioWare or Bethesda classic, but the resemblance is only superficial, and I didn't find the characters or stories memorable.

A disjointed main story, bland cast and barrage of quests that all end the same way has me missing the days

when *Assassin's Creed* was solely focused on the two things it still excels at: infiltrating a place and killing the right guy inside.

NEW ORDER

As if Ubisoft knew exactly how to get on this classic AC fan's good side, one of *Shadows*' protagonists has

something we haven't had much lately in these games: a direct link to the Assassin Brotherhood. Naoe's story begins with family tragedy, the passing down of a hidden blade, and the destruction of her

shinobi village, fuelling a quest for revenge against a shadowy organisation of masked killers.

It's a routine kickoff, but its emotional beats are elevated by Naoe actor Masumi Tsunoda's performance capture, Ubisoft's

I didn't find the characters or stories memorable

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stealth-action adventure set in feudal Japan

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Quebec

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 9900KS,
32GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce
RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
tinyurl.com/bdxe5ku4

sharper cinematography this time around and a ripping soundtrack, a collaboration between traditional composers and Canadian-Japanese rock group TEKE::TEKE.

Confusingly, the first chunk of *Shadows* is almost exclusively the Naoe show as she checks the first few names off her big kill board. Yasuke, meanwhile, sits on the sidelines after a brief prologue depicting his introduction to Oda Nobunaga as a slave of Jesuit priests and his rise up the ranks. All the Naoe time early on centres *Shadows*' story on Naoe's crusade. While the majority of quests let you play as either character, Ubi never quite builds a case for Yasuke's dedication to Naoe's cause being stronger than "these bad guys gotta go". He spends the majority of the journey as Naoe's dutiful partner, occasionally flexing his status as a respected samurai to get information, while his personal stake isn't properly explored until the story's nearly over.

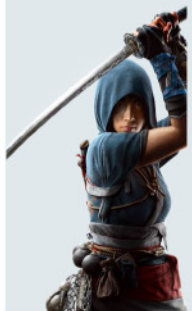
LIGHT FOOT

Shadows' preference for Naoe can also be felt in how you solve problems. Between all the hiding places, rooftops, crawl spaces and tenshu towers that only she can climb, the world is undoubtedly catered to her stealthy toolset.

I can't say enough nice things about the new *Splinter Cell*-inspired visibility meter. Visibility is now a sliding scale based on stance, distance and light level. This is the first time darkness has truly mattered in *Assassin's Creed*. Where past assassins had to stay glued to rooftops to stay incognito, Naoe can choose to stay grounded, eliminating light sources and becoming nearly invisible in dark *Shadows*. That level of nuance in detection, plus the brilliant addition of prone slithering, claws *Assassin's Creed* out of the rut of tall grass, waist-high cover and instakill bows that big-budget games have been stuck in for a decade. We used to be a society that appreciated

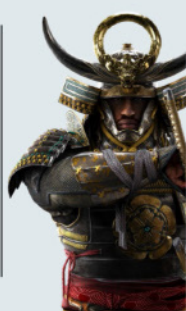
DOUBLE TROUBLE

Meet *Shadows*' dueling protagonists



NAOE

A member of the Japanese Brotherhood of Assassins, Naoe is a master of ninjutsu, wielding a katana, shuriken and kunai, as well as making use of a grappling hook. Naoe is a master of stealth.



YASUKE

An African samurai serving under Japanese warlord Oda Nobunaga, Yasuke is a formidable warrior who, thanks to his great strength, can wield a kanabō, a Japanese spiked, two-handed war club.

Assassin's Creed Shadows

dynamic shadows and sophisticated patrols – that hair-raising feeling of staying dead still in a hallway praying a guard turns around!

I'm conflicted about *Shadows'* changing seasons. The pitch is exactly the sort of quietly ambitious idea that Ubisoft loves to build entire games around, quirks be damned.

Time passes as you complete quests, and every few hours the whole map transforms to fit the season.

Ubi artists actually hunkered down and made four variations of its gigantic map, and they're all absurdly pretty, but the promise that seasonal conditions would change my playstyle never really happened. The differences are there, they're just slight – a few times I hid in some grass that wouldn't have been there in winter, for instance, rainfall dampens noise to a degree, and castle walls are easier to scale when their moats are frozen, but I never had to change up my strategy.

What matters more than anything is time of day: those pretty shadows can only fully hide you at night, and weirdly there's no *MGSV*-like cigar that passes the time, so I did a lot more daytime infiltrating than I would've preferred.

THE DEMON

The day is when Yasuke shines. I expected *Shadows'* emphasis on Naoe to invalidate the dual protagonist schtick, and yet I ended up playing more of the main story as Yasuke. That's how much fun the combat is.

Every few hours the whole map transforms to fit the season

There's nothing revolutionary going on with *Shadows'* light attacks, heavy attacks, blocks and parries, but this is the first time *Assassin's Creed* combat has felt great since the chain-killing days of Ezio. Gone are the sauceless, floaty combos of *Origins*, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*. Blades clash, cleave, or draw blood with every collision.

Repeated blows shed armour and send helmets flying, making enemies vulnerable.

Most objects that aren't nailed down are destructible, which is largely an aesthetic upgrade but

is also useful for the occasional environmental assist by launching a bandit into a cabbage stand with Yasuke's kick (an ability that never left my shortcuts).

Combat didn't immediately sing – those first ten hours locked to Naoe were a struggle. Challenging a roomful of ronin and spearmen with her limited weapon options is signing up for hard mode. She can parry but not block. Her health pool is half of Yasuke's, she deals way less damage, and it takes ages to stagger even medium-sized enemies. I spent most of my Naoe time like I had a swordfighting allergy, which made Yasuke's late introduction cathartic.

Yasuke radiates "I'm not trapped in here with you, you're trapped in here with me" energy, shrugging off glancing blows and overpowering low-level grunts with sheer muscle. He sucks at climbing, but he can shove guys to the ground just by sprinting at them.

Ubisoft tries to balance Yasuke's playstyle by giving him way more options – he has five distinct weapon skill trees versus Naoe's three, and his special abilities are exclusively aggressive. By level 30, I'd unlocked a clutch katana lifesteal move that dealt more damage the less health I had.

It's never quite enough to overcome the reality that maining Yasuke is like playing an easier, simpler samurai videogame versus Naoe's high-stake infiltrations, but the option to swap at almost any time meant I could go stealthy with Naoe when being a one-man-army got dull, then flip to Yasuke when I got tired of tiptoeing around guards instead of ploughing right through them.

NUMBERS GAME

As a lapsed AC fan who liked how *Mirage* dialled back the loot craze of *Origins*, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, it took some time to accept how deeply loot-motivated *Shadows* is. Its open world is overstuffed with raw materials – minerals, hay, cloth and wood used to expand my hideout or upgrade weapons – that are mine for the taking, even when the context doesn't make sense.

It's easy enough to accept that Naoe and Yasuke's plan to bring peace and balance to Japan involves plundering the nobility's castles Robin Hood-style, but Ubi never sufficiently establishes why it's cool to mercilessly pillage a local trade harbour or slaughter all the guards at some dude's house to steal his prized katana. I guess it's not a leap to imagine our vigilantes are only targeting crooked warlords, though I suspect even that applies more logic to Ubi's world than it intended.

Shadows exhibits a 'kill first, ask questions never' approach to questing that would probably go down smoother if I were a *Diablo* or *World of Warcraft* guy. Despite the presence of a BioWare-like dialogue wheel, conversations were brief and most NPCs are just vending machines spitting out tasks, allowing no follow-up questions about what I'm doing or where I'm going. Not even my companions could be chatted up in any significant way outside of their recruitment quests.

Maybe I'm feeling the shallow world building harder because of *Shadows'* proximity to two strong, talkative RPGs in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* and *Avowed*, but I'm

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Recent *Assassin's Creed* games through time



ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS 2017

Rewind the clock back to Ancient Egypt's Ptolemaic period from 49 to 38 BC. Watch out for the River Nile's crocodiles.



ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY 2018

Assassinate during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, from 431 to 422 BC. Don't forget your sandals.



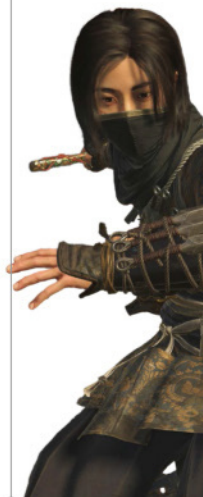
ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA 2020

Live out a Viking fantasy throughout the years of 872–878 AD by rowing, fighting and plundering.



ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE 2023

Stab and parkour your way across 9th-century Baghdad as Basim Ibn Ishaq, a street thief who joins the Hidden Ones.

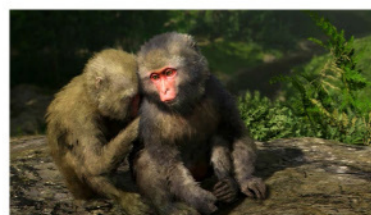
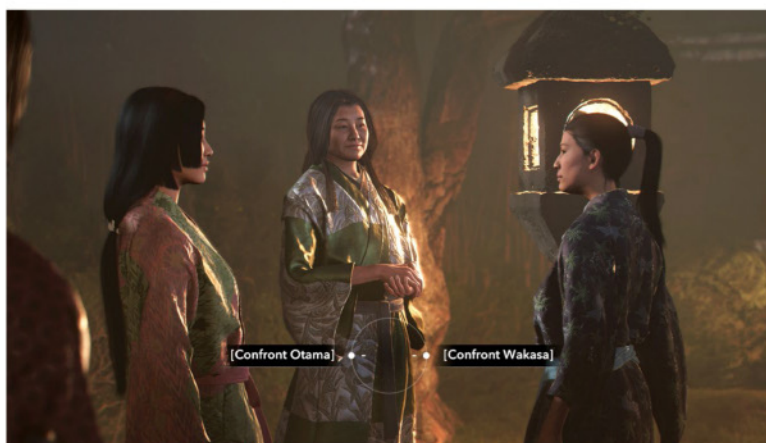




The Port at Sakai

The name Sakai, meaning "barren", comes from the river's position on the border of three provinces: Settsu, Kawachi, and Ise. Originally a medieval minor (shōen), the estate expanded as a port station on the Kamata River (Kawachi River), relative to the nearby Suwayama Shrine. The town of Sakai, with its proximity to the sea, was established by warlords and dominated as a cargo terminal at the end of the inland sea (Inland Sea) during the 14th and 15th centuries. Goods from Kyoto were shipped down the Yodo River toward the delta in the direction of Sakai where more and more goods arrived from the west of the country and even from China.

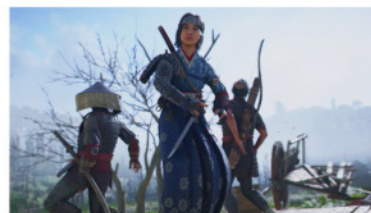
Over time, an international shipping route was established, connecting the Chinese port of Ningbo near modern-day Shanghai to southern Kyushu (Satsuma), then around the island of Shikoku to Sakai. The authority offered a competitive alternative to the older trade route through the port of Hakata in northern Kyushu, which was used in the political power struggle between the lords of the Honnō-ji clan who had a significant influence over the shōgun of Ashikaga, and the powerful Chōshi lords, who controlled southern Haruku and northeastern Kyushu, including the port of Hakata.



ABOVE: The game's new Anvil engine delivers stunning visuals at higher graphics settings.

FAR LEFT: You must choose.

LEFT: *Shadows* is stuffed with animals, from dogs and cats to deer, monkeys and more.

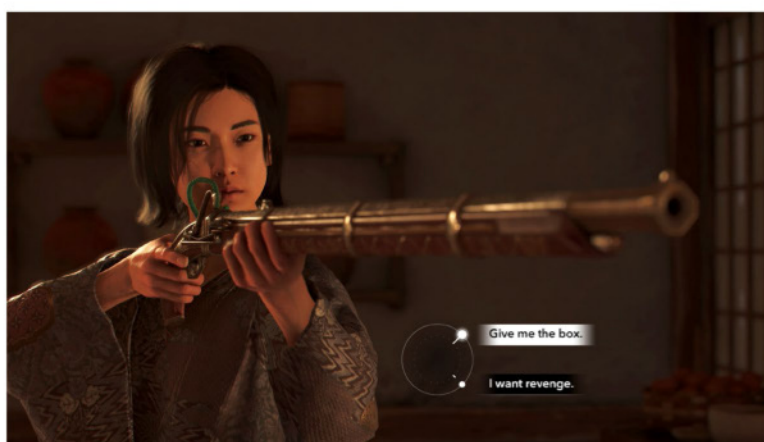
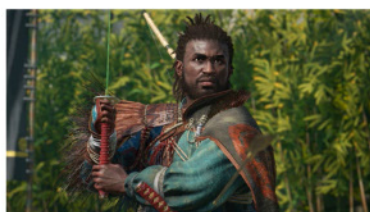
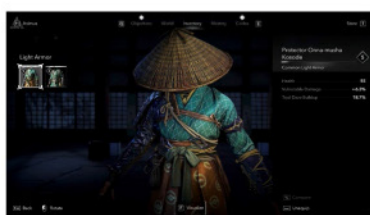


Yasuke hits very hard with his kanabō war club.



ABOVE: This guy's day just got a lot worse.

FAR RIGHT: The box contained Naoe's prized collection of PC Gamer magazines.



not that hard to please. I roamed Japan by horse looking to make connections and found only throats to stab. In dozens of hours I can recall exactly one memorable character in a sidequest: a mysterious 'yokai' who's actually just a dude who dresses up as a melon every spring and fights his friend. That guy rocked.

Melon man aside, *Shadows* is just one huge bounty board. There is no traditional quest list or journal tab, only an objectives screen that maps out the dozen-plus factions who need

killing in Japan. It never gets more complicated. *Shadows* is the sort of game that assumes I'm so concerned with XP and legendary gear that it tells me exactly what rewards I'll get before I've started a task. It's the kind of RPG where every region has an NPC who asks me to murder exactly 100 bad guys. The only thing that makes sense in this world is the loot. And, the loot is strong.

PRIZE FIGHTER

My eyes were ready to glaze over *Shadows'* procedural loot the first time I pulled an Uncommon Tanto out of a box, but it didn't take long to find Epic and Legendary gear that comes with genuinely exciting, game-changing perks. The very first castle I toppled in Kyoto gave me an armour set that let Yasuke parry unblockable red attacks, an ability so valuable that I kept upgrading that chestpiece for the next 20 hours. Now I'm nearly level 40 and up to my neck in powerful gear competing for my attention.

I love that *Shadows* isn't precious about handing out legendaries and even tells me what the biggest prize in a palace, fort, or castle is before I spend 20 minutes tearing it apart. But what ties a nice bow on the whole loot experience is a flexible engraving system I unlocked a few days in. Every new perk found in a chest or attached to a weapon becomes an engraving that I can pay to apply to any other gear. By the time I had dozens of helmets, armours and weapons crowding my pockets, I'd built up this elaborate library of remappable perks that let me put together some truly overpowered gear.

Ubisoft's interpretation of 16th-century Japan is an achievement, but its locations have more personality than the people who inhabit them. Its cities are dense and appear active, but interactivity is low. The central city of Kyoto has hundreds of civilians, merchants and craftsmen going about their lives, yet

I can interact with just two or three merchants selling rations or horses. City guards patrol the streets, but cutting them down in broad daylight has zero consequences beyond upsetting city folk in the vicinity. There is no concept of crime or a 'wanted' status unless you mess up in a restricted zone, and guards within those zones won't chase me outside of them.

That's the real culprit making *Shadows'* cities feel artificial. Older eras of *Assassin's Creed* knew how to make cities one cohesive playground. In nearly 50 hours of *Shadows*, I haven't had a single satisfying chase because it's so easy to jump over a wall and watch guards lose interest.

LONG ROAD

If you're noticing a rollercoaster-shaped review here, it's because appreciating *Shadows* took some calibration. It had me asking myself what I like about *Assassin's Creed* and

questioning if my gripes with its weak characters and dull storylines were real hindrances or perceived deficiencies I created by holding *Shadows* to an arbitrary RPG rubric. When I booted up *Shadows* for the first time since rolling credits a few days earlier, my quest tab was still packed with faces and names to hunt down – warlords, samurai, corrupt merchants, supposed yokai – so I chose a target at random. The ritual was comforting: pick a name, deduce the location, sneak in and get the kill. I kept at it for hours, trying bolder strategies to go undetected, putting new loadouts through their paces and challenging myself to find targets with minimal clues.

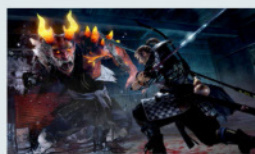
Jeez, this game is so huge that I haven't even mentioned its brilliant navigation. By default, you're only given clues about where people and places are, like "southwest of X" or "near a street with red lamps". The idea is to use Scouts, a reconnaissance currency, to search an area and confirm where to go, but if you skip that part, something as routine as riding to a quest marker becomes its own game of Geoguessr.

It was the best time I'd had in *Shadows* since the start, and I couldn't quite place why. The fact that the main story was behind me and I didn't feel rushed any more was a factor, but I wasn't just relaxed – I was revelling in my checklist game, savouring every assassination, and not thinking about what I'd change. It's like I'd finally learned how to like *Shadows*. On my second monitor, my partner was duelling a lightning dragon in *Monster Hunter Wilds*, and it occurred to me that we were basically doing the same thing: picking names, hunting targets, collecting some loot.

I don't think *Shadows* is something to marathon. You could completely ignore the story, come back six months later, and still be up to speed. I know I'll still be picking away at its 30+ castles later in 2025 and 2026, because I get the itch for a great stealth game every few months, and now I have a new one with a whole lot of stuff to do. ■

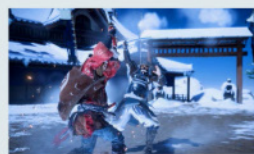
SAMURAI SHOWDOWN

Four other top samurai games to play



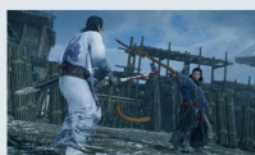
NIOH

Cut your way through human warriors and Japanese yokai demons as a lone traveller.



GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

Sucker Punch's now legendary game sees you playing as samurai Jin Sakai.



RISE OF THE RONIN

Another slice 'em up from Team Ninja, but more grounded in reality rather than myth.



TREK TO YOMI

This action game places you as Hiroki, a young swordsman on a quest for revenge.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Excellent stealth and combat prevail against *Assassin's Creed Shadows'* dull story and forgettable cast.

80

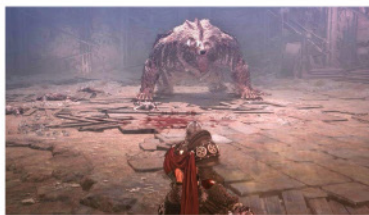


General Khazan seeks vengeance against the nobles.

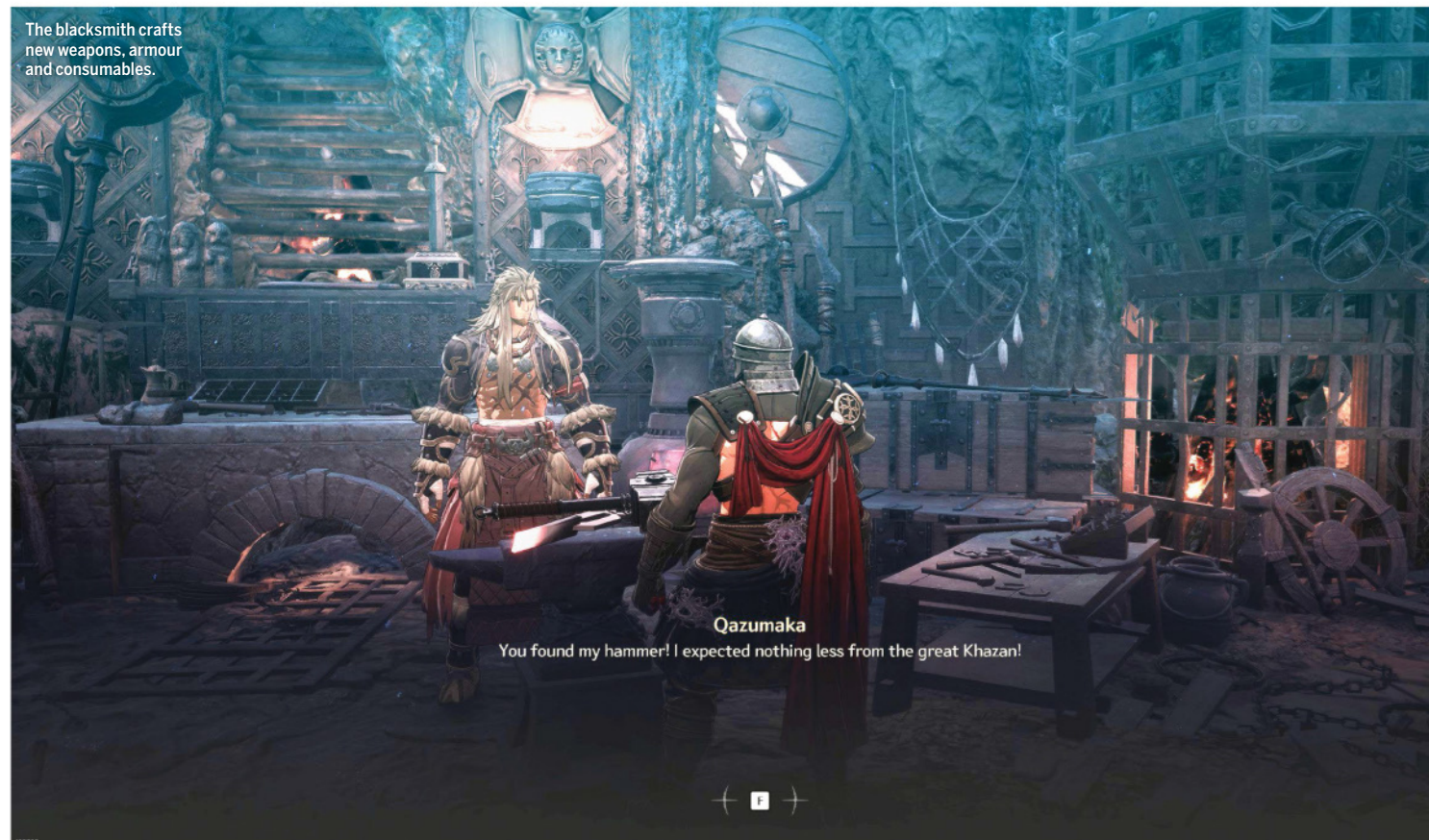


RIGHT: *Khazan's* tanky bosses can be quite challenging.

UPPER RIGHT: To be good at combat you must learn the game's systems.



This game has impeccable vibes when it comes to cutscenes.



The blacksmith crafts new weapons, armour and consumables.

Qazumaka

You found my hammer! I expected nothing less from the great Khazan!

4/20/18

GO BERSERK

Reap bloody Soulslike vengeance in **THE FIRST BERSERKER: KHAZAN**

By Sean Martin

Do you remember the moment that *Sekiro* forced you to start playing by its rules? For me, I was trundling through the game like I was playing *Dark Souls* when I hit the Lady Butterfly boss, and suddenly there was no room for doubt: if I didn't properly learn these new combat mechanics, I wasn't going any further. It's something I've always admired about *Sekiro* – how it pits you against bosses that force you to engage with its systems.

As with many Soulslikes in recent years, *Khazan* apes quite a few of *Sekiro*'s more-than-familiar combat mechanics – whether deflecting to build a gauge and stagger a boss, or avoiding unblockable attacks that flash red. But more than perhaps any other Soulslike I've played, *Khazan* successfully adds its own twists to these timeworn mechanics, while providing a lineup of fantastically designed bosses who make you dance like a monkey as you learn them.

Like *Demon's Souls*, *Khazan* is a series of linear missions that you portal to via a hub, as the eponymous general battles through each map on his journey of vengeance to reach a final boss. Though these missions can feel kind of samey after a while, with a lack of exploration, significant NPC quests or verticality – you can't jump – *Khazan*'s combat and boss battles are enough to carry it.

Your three weapons – a dual-wield sword and axe, a glaive and a greatsword – each have dedicated skill trees, and its armour uses the same bonus system as *Black Myth: Wukong* when equipping multiple pieces from a set. Its combat follows a similar resource model as you accumulate Spirit; points you then use to perform weapon skills.

Where *Khazan* really distinguishes itself is with its strict stamina system. Skills don't consume stamina, so you use them to supplement attacking and defending, throwing out combos almost like a fighting game to deal as much damage as you can. Many of *Khazan*'s bosses have fixed stamina

bars that you slowly chip down to perform a brutal attack, *Sekiro*-style, but others have stamina bars that fluctuate – just like they're using stamina. It means that though bosses unleash deadly combos, they're vulnerable to a stagger right after them – a nice little reward for staying alive and a very smart idea.

Not every attack is parryable; it's up to you to work out which

DEADLY SKILL

Speaking of other smart ideas, *Khazan* gives Lacrima (Souls to level stats) and skill points just for fighting bosses. It's satisfying to successfully deflect a tough combo for the first

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cel-shaded Soulslike set in the world of *Dungeon Fighter Online*

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Neople

PUBLISHER
Nexon

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12400F, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
tinyurl.com/2p8wj2aa

time and get a little message saying "Skill point obtained" – it made me feel far more content taking my time to learn each boss. After all, *Khazan* has some difficulty spikes, especially when it wants you to engage with a new system.

Besides simple timed-deflections, *Khazan* uses the red unblockable attacks from *Sekiro*, but here you can risk tricky timing to parry them with a counterattack and deal stamina damage. You can also use reflection to parry normal attacks, though not every attack is parryable; it's up to you to work out which, and weave that into your strategy. And if you don't like parrying? Each weapon has a whole skill section dedicated to dodge and post-dodge attacks.

Another way *Khazan* encourages experiments is with no respec costs for skills. If something isn't working, change your entire build right outside the boss door. Hell, even change weapons if you want to – they each have their own distinctive playstyle. Tanky bosses and limited healing mean that if you don't use the skill system or strategise and try stuff out, you're going to have a miserable time.

Khazan isn't a game that you can brute force. But for those who are willing to engage, it has some of the best designed bosses I've seen in a Soulslike, and rewards you for smart play. Though the story is nothing to write home about, it accomplishes the most important thing with its anime-esque art style: giving us a greatsword that feels amazing so we can pretend it's Berserk.

If you're still unsure, try *Khazan*'s quite generous demo on Steam and battle to the Blade Phantom boss – this is where things will click into place if they're going to. ■

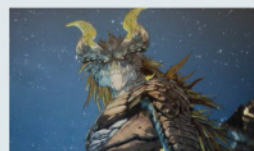
YOU'RE THE BOSS

Tackle these tough foes



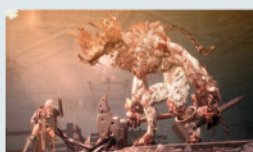
BLADE PHANTOM

This stabby spirit is voiced by Anthony Howell who plays Margit in *Elden Ring*. What's with that?



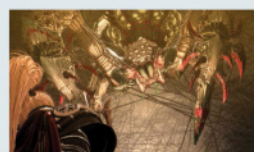
VIPER

As *Khazan*'s first proper difficulty spike, Viper will prove to be an immense challenge.



VOLBAINO

This hammer-wielding deer is tricky because he deals fire damage with a flaming nail.



ARATRA

You'll want to bring some poison resistance when taking on this big spider and its brood.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Khazan's stellar boss design and combat more than make up for samey missions and a flat protagonist.

80

UN-UNITED KINGDOM

ATOMFALL is a muddled misadventure in need of a stronger identity.

By Fraser Brown

I've spent years wandering many an inhospitable wasteland, so *Atomfall's* pleasant post-apocalypse is pretty inviting. They've got tea here. And bakeries. And it's extremely green – not because of radiation storms, but because it's all pastures and woods and verdant hills as far as the eye can see. It'd be a nice place for a ramble, if it weren't for the fire-spewing robots, lethal flora, bandits, cultists and conspiracies.

With its '50s-inspired retro-futuristic setting, *Atomfall* has needed to contend with the spectre of *Fallout* since it was first unveiled, but the similarities are only surface deep.

That shallowness is probably *Atomfall's* defining feature: it's chock full of systems and obvious inspirations, but it rarely digs into them and struggles to set itself apart.

It flirts with *Fallout*, *STALKER*, RPGs, survival games and all sorts of different systems, and it pulls you in lots of different directions. They all end in one place, though: escape. You're stuck in this picturesque prison, trapped by a quarantine that's already in its fifth year. Inspired by the real Windscale fire – a 1957 nuclear disaster in what is now Cumbria, England – Rebellion swaps radiation for a sci-fi MacGuffin

and a potentially fatal cover up. And of course only an amnesiac without a personality can find a way out.

Meandering is how I'd have to describe the road to freedom. Finding the right people to help you escape, and completing the tasks they set you, will see you wander across five areas, including an underground facility, all the while filling in blanks and connecting loose threads.

Rather than traditional quests, *Atomfall* doles out leads, which despite how developer Rebellion frames them are basically just quests with a bit less hand-holding and a more investigative bent. Sometimes you'll discover an interesting building, hear rumours about a point of interest, read a letter that reveals another conspiracy, or get sent on an explicit task – all of these could be

I enjoyed rooting around, trying to understand this weird place

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A semi open-world sci-fi mystery based on a real nuclear disaster from the '50s

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

PUBLISHER
Rebellion

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
atomfall.com

leads, which then come with subtasks and get fleshed out by your findings.

While this structure doesn't shake things up too much, I did enjoy the more freeform approach, and the sense that I was rooting around, trying to understand this weird place, rather than exclusively being sent on odd jobs. And a lot of these mysteries are properly compelling, set as they are in a world where you can't really trust anyone's motivations.

The way they connect and intersect elevates them, too. I'd been working with another survivor on an escape plan and had decided I trusted them more than anyone else in the quarantine zone. But while I was helping them, I randomly wandered into an abandoned building and, beneath it, discovered a deserted hideout, which eventually led me to another location and a new survivor, who offered another way out. It didn't work out, but this chance meeting eventually helped me join the dots, revealing new details about my other ally – who it turned out was not as trustworthy as I'd previously assumed.

It's really fun stuff, but I can't help but imagine how it would work even better if there'd been more of a focus on it, perhaps even scrapping one of the less compelling systems to free up the resources. Maybe some proper Telltale-style social puzzles?

GRAB BAG

Actually embracing its RPG side would have benefited *Atomfall's* leads system even more. I enjoyed all the big decisions, betrayals and shotgun alliances, but the impact is lessened when you're playing as an amnesiac with zero personality. Sure, you can choose to be a do-gooder, a liar, a straight-shooter or whatever, but when you're picking these options you're never embodying a character.

This extends to the very slim progression system, too. As you explore, you'll find drugs that give you skill points, and books that will

TRUST EXERCISES

Meet some potential escape partners



CAPTAIN SIMS

Leader of the zone's armed forces (known as Protocol), Sims is mostly interested in law and order, but he's sick of being stuck here. Help him out and he might let you escape with him.



DOCTOR GARROW

A callous genius, Garrow knows more about this place than anyone else, but she only cares about science. Her goals are a mystery, but her knowledge might help you escape.



THE VOICE

A mysterious voice communicating through phone boxes. He tells you to trust nobody but him, while giving you little information. He always knows where you are and what you're up to.

Don't let the hat fool you, this guy loves crime.

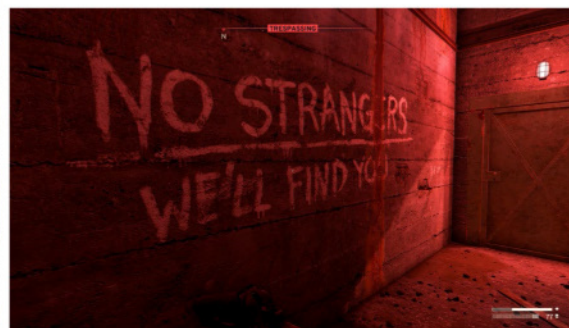


FAR LEFT: Soldiers and mechs aren't immediately hostile, but they're still a huge threat.



BELOW: Wyndham is a quaint pocket of civilisation, but it's rife with paranoia.





FAR RIGHT:
Inspiration for my
next desktop upgrade.



☛ reveal new skill lines for you to spend them on, but my god are they boring. A buff to radiation resistance! More range with throwing weapons! Stealthier kills! It's all generic stuff, and you're not really making a build.

Atomfall has similar problems in its approach to combat and survival. By the end of the game I was trying

to avoid most fights simply because their simplicity couldn't make up for their repetition. Firearms are everywhere but ammo is scarce, and there's not much more I can say about the guns – ranged combat is functional but uninspired.

Melee's in a rougher state. The scarcity of ammo suggests melee is the way to go, but you can't dodge or block, which turns these brawls into slogs where you're just slashing away while walking backwards.

So I did quite a bit of sneaking, which is as close as *Atomfall* comes to giving you superpowers.

Technically you can only hide in tall grass, but in reality you can sometimes hide in plain sight. I got a good laugh out of watching some outlaws try to find me when I was simply on the other side of a transparent fence and they were staring right at me.

On the survival front, there's very little going on, to the point where I think *Rebellion* is being a wee bit cheeky pitching *Atomfall* as a "survival-action game". There's crafting. You can make drugs, bombs and weapon upgrades. I used bandages and Molotov cocktails a lot, but never felt compelled to use many

other items from the list. There's also food, which heals you, and a metal detector that lets you 'scavenge'.

While the environment is hostile, with dangerous wildlife and some areas covered in noxious gas, it's not the kind of hostility you might expect from a survival game. The weather, for instance, is static. It's a sunny day all day. No radioactive storms. No dark nights where you can't get around without a torch – which makes the inclusion of a torch a bit baffling. Even when I was spelunking in some mines I could see everything clearly.

Atomfall makes its conspiracies engaging, and even lets you feel quite clever

SNAPSHOT

This speaks to one of its biggest problems in regards to *Atomfall*'s setting: it's actually quite plain. There are patrolling enemies, the odd environmental hazard and that retro-futuristic aesthetic, but the rolling hills and druid-infested woods often feel rather static.

Worse, that aesthetic never goes any further than window dressing. Where *Fallout* uses its setting for satire, skewering capitalism, Cold War paranoia, nuclear proliferation and political regimes, *Atomfall* simply mentions these things, almost in passing. It doesn't actually have anything to say about them.

This makes it sound like I was having a bad time, but to my surprise as much as anyone else's, I actually rather enjoyed playing *Atomfall*. I love a good mystery, and *Atomfall* makes untangling its conspiracies engaging, and like an adventure game even lets you feel quite clever.

A lot of revelations are nestled within the Interchange, a huge underground facility connected to each of the four other maps. This is where the scientists worked before the disaster, and it's now the most dangerous part of the quarantine zone. Since you can get to any map from it, it serves as a shortcut (there's no fast travel), but it's also labyrinthine, fortified and often fatal.

Inside the Interchange, you'll do some light puzzle-solving with a gizmo that changes the flow of energy to power boxes, shutting down turrets or accidentally creating new environmental hazards. It's one of the few places where *Atomfall* succeeds in creating an atmosphere, and even evokes the likes of *Half-Life*'s Black Mesa or *Metro*'s tunnels.

The way you make a bit of progress, find yourself stumped, and then return with more knowledge and tools, makes the Interchange feel almost *Metroidvania*-esque.

So there's fun to be had here, but *Atomfall* is undone by its fear of commitment. It never really goes all in on anything. It dabbles. Some basic crafting. A bit of simple stealth. The tiniest bit of NPC factional rivalry. It doesn't have *Fallout*'s free-form RPG systems, *STALKER*'s simulated world or even *Far Cry*'s dedication to carnage – the sort of thing that all these other systems can orbit – so I've spent my time feeling adrift.

As compelling as the mystery of the Windscale disaster is, with all of its leads and conspiracies, it's not enough for a central hook. Like everything else in *Atomfall*, *Rebellion* doesn't take it far enough.

It's competently made, and I'll never say no to the opportunity to do some detective work (I once considered setting up a private investigator firm with my dog), but it's just missing a spark. It's *Rebellion*'s most ambitious game, but it falls short of the likes of *Sniper Elite*, where everything exists to serve a specific fantasy – one where you're a death-dealing assassin, putting bullets in Nazi skulls in gratuitous slow-motion. *Atomfall* just doesn't have this clear identity. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Rebellion's Atomfall can be an excellent, fun diversion, but it really needs to take a gap year so it can find itself.

62

COUNTRYSIDE JAUNT

The regions of the quarantine zone



SLATTEN DALE

This is where you start your misadventure, in a region dominated by a quarry and filled to the brim with hostile outlaws, who you'll need to rob to survive.



WYNDHAM VILLAGE

The most peaceful part of the zone. It's run by Protocol, and underneath all of the civilised veneer there is simmering resentment and paranoia...



CASTERFELL WOODS

A wooded area infested with pagan druids who believe they can communicate with the natural world. Basically, they loved The Wicker Man.



SKETHERMOORE

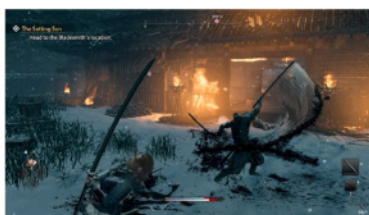
A region covered in farmland, but dominated by the Protocol's vast prison. It's a busy place, full of soldiers and outlaws, but it's not been picked clean yet.





RIGHT: An apple a day keeps murderous ronin at bay. Fact.

BELOW: Thanks to strong character customisation options, looking good while you kill has never been easier.



EDO OR DON'T

RISE OF THE RONIN stumbles onto PC

By Joe Donnelly

Rise of the Ronin on PC has kept me guessing for all the wrong reasons. Don't get me wrong, I love a rambling systems-heavy open-world action RPG romp as much as the next guy. I'm fond of being led on countless wild goose chases across fantastical lands with ambiguous historical grounding. And I'm partial to layered combat systems, brutal melee combinations and enemies who scale in difficulty as I become increasingly adept at waving a pretend wooden stick around while clicking my real-life mouse at the exact right moment. Lest I cop one in the mouth myself, of course.

What I'm less into is unpredictable performance issues. I'm far less enamoured by fps counts that shuttle between single and triple digits faster than a round of Family Feud, and I don't care much for being forced into slow motion movement in built-up areas, wading through proverbial Edo-era treacle, simply because my screen is busy with NPCs and quest-givers. Team Ninja, it must be said, has blazed a trail into the action RPG genre over the last few years. But the developer is also no stranger to poor PC ports in that same stretch. And that makes recommending *Rise of the Ronin* on PC via Steam in its current state difficult.

SMOOTH CRIMINAL

You see, when *Rise of the Ronin* is running smoothly, it's a dream. With a framerate cap of 120 on high settings, I breezed through its character customisation suite and tutorial without issue, which at various points involves switching between fighters on the fly mid-combat, executing break-neck combos and gruesome limb-severing finishing moves, before zipping over rooftops by virtue of a quick-fire grappling hook. But barely had I planted my feet on the slick timber deck of a 19th century navy vessel in *Rise of the Ronin's* opening mission before things turned to crap.

With a half dozen extra bodies on-screen, my characters suddenly moved in slow-motion. Animations

jarred, audio dipped in and out, and texture pop-in blighted, well, just about everything. I dropped my settings down to standard and then eventually to low to no avail, as the night rain battered down on my two listless combatants in something that better resembled the jailbreak scene in *The Shawshank*

Redemption. As if wading through the poisonous swamps of *Dark Souls' Blighttown*, I painstakingly made my way to the ship's stairs just a few feet away and headed for its lower deck.

Met with even more baddies than before, my heart sank

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A PC port of Team Ninja's Edo-era action RPG that landed on PS5 last year

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Team Ninja

PUBLISHER
Koei Tecmo

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10875H,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
tinyurl.com/yym3cwap

Met with even more baddies than before, my heart sank. And then, inexplicably, my performance spiked.

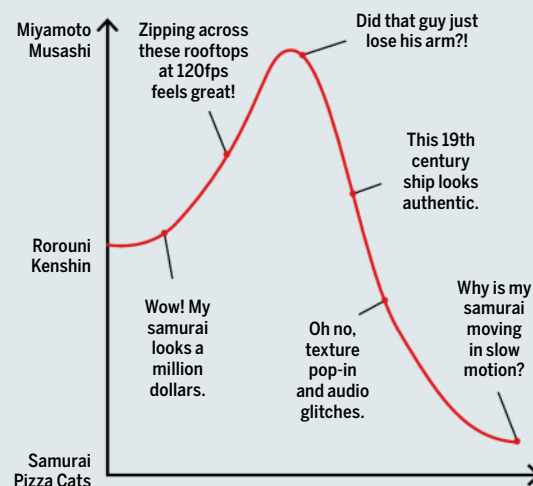
I morphed into a Boshin War legend with fists of fury and a wooden stick that moved like a fly swatter. I made light work of my aggressors and even lighter work of the FPS cap in a lightning-fast, silky-smooth blaze of glory. Fast forward 20 minutes, and I was back in the optimisation doldrums as I stared down a cluster of angry swordsmen whose leather boots appeared superglued to the snowfield beneath them.

And so went my time with *Rise of the Ronin* on PC. Sublime one moment, ridiculous the next, and no less frustrating throughout. Which is a shame, not just because it compromised my own time with this version of the game, but because I'm clearly not an isolated example. Quick to address the recorded issues, publisher Koei Tecmo issued a performance-facing update on launch day stating it was "investigating" reports and working on a patch that aims to "fix or improve some of these issues". At the time of writing this is yet to materialise, however, it's worth noting that almost half of the game's Steam reviews are still positive.

Whether or not the patch fixes things, the difference between a game like this one and, say, *Monster Hunter Wilds* is that it tends to only be the very best games that are capable of brushing themselves down and fully bouncing back. I'm not convinced people care enough about *Rise of the Ronin* for that to happen and I get the feeling the damage has already been done. In any event, Team Ninja's PC port has ruled itself out of the conversation for the time being. ■

RISE (AND FALL) OF THE RONIN

My introduction to this samurai slasher



PC GAMER VERDICT

Another fumbled PC port blighted by poor optimisation and unpredictable performance issues.

49

RUN AND CHEAT

FRAGPUNK offers a thrilling approach to competitive shooters

By Echo Apsey

What if, while playing a competitive shooter, you could force your opponents to fire their weapon every five seconds? What if you could instantly teleport them back to their spawn when they take damage? What if you could toss aside a weapon to turn it into a mini-turret? Every match, *Fragpunk* tosses out half a dozen gimmicks that could anchor entire videogames with its incredible Shard Card system. These act like cheat codes that break the rules of traditional shooters.

While *Fragpunk* takes the basic formula of *Counter-Strike* and *Valorant*, with each 5v5 Shard Clash match consisting of defenders protecting a bomb site and attackers trying to plant the bomb, matches are much shorter. Quick play is the first to four round wins, and ranked is the first to six. This gives each match an urgency that pairs well with the unpredictable cards and faster pace:

As you kill members of the enemy team, plant the bomb, defuse the bomb, land assists and complete rounds, you earn points to spend on Shard Cards before each round. Some of these cards involve having to scream and shout louder in voice chat to boost your movement speed or let your character lie down and nap to heal. There are also objective cards that

allow you to plant the bomb anywhere or throw it to have it auto-plant itself.

The creativity on display here is leaps and bounds ahead of any other competitive FPS. It's exhilarating as a player to suss out an advantageous combination in the moment, and even more gratifying to be constantly surprised by what I can do in the game because of them.

It is just so refreshing to play something so unconventional in a genre that is often stale. Despite the wild swings that both you and your opponents can cause, *Fragpunk* doesn't ever feel unbalanced.

Fragpunk also breaks from some other conventions: between rounds you can switch your Lancer (aka hero) and weapons. There is no

You earn points to spend on Shard Cards before each round

A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

You better be ready for...



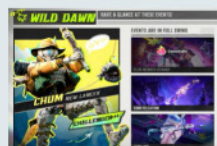
MODS
Fragpunk has one of the better weapon customisation systems in a shooter.



STICKERS
You can place stickers, kill counters, and charms anywhere you damn well like.



PAYMENTS
It is marred by an overly complex and gacha-seque set of micro-transactions.



CURRENCIES
There's an overwhelming assault of currencies, events and battle passes.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A competitive *CS:GO* and *Valorant* style shooter that introduces gameplay-changing buffs and debuffs called Shard Cards

EXPECT TO PAY
Free to Play

DEVELOPER
Bad Guitar Studio

PUBLISHER
Bad Guitar Studio/
NetEase

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-13650HX,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
fragpunk.com

money; there are just limits on the number of rounds you can finish with a weapon type. This is another clever differentiator from *Counter-Strike* and *Valorant*, forcing players to engage with the card system to inform their weapon choices. For example, some cards will boost the accuracy of a weapon or unlock charged shots for a gun. Capitalising on these perks, rather than falling back on a top-tier rifle, pushes you to make the most of every round and makes weapon choice matter more.

LANCERS

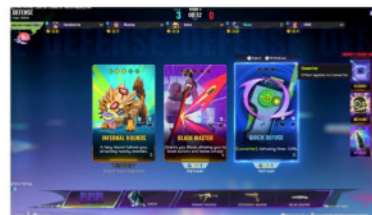
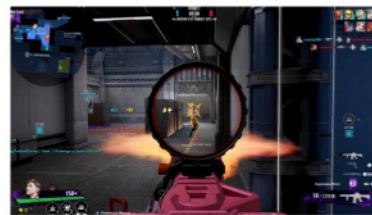
The same goes for Lancers, they don't fall into classes, as their abilities often pull from multiple of them, allowing for more flexibility within matches. On the fly you can change to a rusher like Axon or Corona if you have a team that plays slow at the back of a map, or use a Shard Card that boosts movement speed and allows you to load all your ammo into one magazine, overwhelming a team by pushing quickly. You can do this for one round and then completely alter your Lancers and weapons based on the shard cards you get during the next round. This ability to constantly remake our strategy every few minutes led to thrilling matches.

I'd consider the gunplay, sound design, and movement to be as good as any other shooter available today, with a distinctive blend of the precise aim needed in *Valorant* and *CS* and the faster movement found in *Apex Legends*. Everything is animated and presented like an animator's sketchbook: I love the little flair effects when you land headshots, and the game's maps, Lancer designs, and menus are coursing with colour and dripping with personality. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Fragpunk's bold decision to break almost every rule in the book leads to a captivating shooter.

83

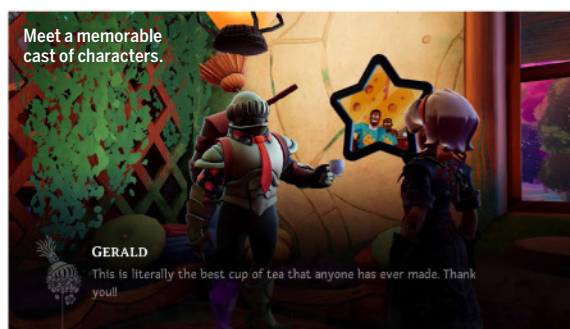


ABOVE: Sonar's side hustle is professional loo unblocker. Fact.

FAR LEFT: There is buckets of creativity on display.



BELOW: A tea kettle so big you need a ladder to use it.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Ivy Road

LINK
ivyroad.fun

HELP WANTED

A fallen warrior makes tea in **WANDERSTOP**

Go to therapy. That's the message I received in *Wanderstop*, a narrative adventure about a warrior running a tea shop. I think it's great advice, especially since it comes with an important and honest caveat: therapy, helpful as it may be, won't fix you. It's just a starting point.

In *Wanderstop* you play as Alta, a fierce warrior who hasn't known a single defeat in years, but who one day finds herself so weak she can't even lift her sword. She collapses and awakens in a forest clearing where a cosy teashop owner named Boro suggests she recover her strength while learning how to make tea.

What follows is part tea shop management sim and part story-driven adventure as Alta grapples with her mental health and examines her relentless need to be a champion.

It's all beautifully done: the teashop management system could have been an enjoyable game on its own, with fantasy characters placing orders and you farming and mixing.

But there's the other half of the game, where you learn about Alta's life and history and self-doubts, where you talk to customers about your problems, where you speak regularly with the kind, gentle, and generous Boro, who listens to your troubles without judgement, who doesn't give advice but instead offers his own perspective. It also explores the perils of being offered help from people who don't really understand the type of help you need.

Wanderstop is successful at both ends: it's a satisfying teashop sim and a story I'm still thinking about after I've finished. ■

Chris Livingston

84

DINO-MITE

TWO POINT MUSEUM is the top of the management sim

Two Point Studios has successfully cornered the niche market of contorting straight-laced concepts into zany shenanigans all wrapped up in a stellar management sim, and *Two Point Museum* very well be the developer's best iteration to date.

With five museums to manage *Two Point Museum's* campaign had me bouncing between each one to progress and unlock new items or mechanics. Memento Mile is your bog-standard fossil exhibition, while Passwater Cove sports an aquarium vibe, and Pebberley Heights puts you on a platform in the clouds where exhibits fall from the sky.

Responsibilities start at little more than sending staff out on expeditions to retrieve new goods to display and decorate. Eventually I'm spinning multiple plates: watching out for

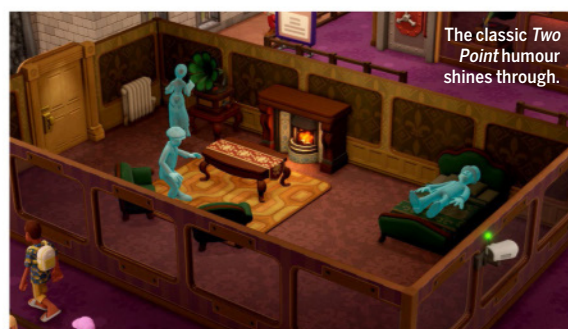
vandals, hosting tours, keeping poltergeists from going mad and terrorising guests.

Each time I return to a museum there's a new challenge to fold into my existing space, stopping things from getting too stale. The game is also constantly chucking new decorations at me and letting me spend hours curating a dollhouse.

Two Point Museum does struggle to let me know when things are going wrong, though. I was haemorrhaging money on one map but wasn't getting much help as to why. Financial charts weren't offering much insight, and my museum rating comments were all positive, leaving me a bit lost in how to ramp up those profits.

Despite that, *Two Point Museum* is a no-brainer. It's the coolest iteration of the formula to date. ■
Mollie Taylor

BELOW: Some exhibits need controlled environments to thrive or survive.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Two Point Studios

LINK
tinyurl.com/44zvrxc

85

The first boss fight is both an endurance battle and a race against the clock.



LITEWEIGHT

GRIT AND VALOR's roguelite combat may value your time more than your smarts

By Dominic Tarason

Some of my favourite moments in roguelikes (and -lites) are when I beat the odds and clawed my way to victory on my very first run. *Grit and Valor – 1949* didn't give me the opportunity. It wanted me to die first, and it tied one of my hands behind my back to get its wish. I had to fight, grind and unlock the privilege of not being doomed.

This isn't to say that *Grit and Valor* is a drag. Combat is snappy and engaging, boss fights are multi-phase slobberknockers and squad compositions come together satisfyingly to wipe out entire waves of fascists. But between battles, progression comes more from time than learning the nuances of combat. Every new pile of points poured into boosting a pilot's special ability, or fresh set of parts slapped onto a mech, provides a significant, permanent upgrade to survivability.

While the base stats of your mechs can grow massively over time, *Grit and Valor* is otherwise an archetypal modern 'pick one of three' roguelike. You lead a trio of mechs in pausable real-time battles across tiny grids, with simple

rock-paper-scissors combat rules that keep the pace high.

Those expecting *Into The Breach* style dynamism to the combat here might be disappointed. This feels more like an RTS 'comp-stomp'.

Units can only attack when standing still and opportunities to repair are infrequent. Pilots have limited special ability charges, so every run hinges on making resources last until you can challenge a boss, then return to restock and cash in progression currency.

It only takes maybe 15 seconds for a unit to cross the entire map, but that's also enough time for your entire squad to get wiped. The fact that your supply plane often drops vital perk crates in dangerous locations makes for some tough decisions, sometimes making you

Every run hinges on making resources last until the boss

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A real-time mech tactics roguelite set in dieselpunk World War II

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Milky Tea Studios

PUBLISHER
Megabit Publishing

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900K,
64GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

STEAM DECK
Verified

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
megabit-publishing.com/games/grit-and-valor-1949

settle for the least-bad move – a little more luck needed than skill, perhaps.

THE 'LITE BRIGADE

The only real technical issue was when multiple units tried to pass the same location – they can get caught on each other and dance around awkwardly. Worse came when trying to evade attacks, units would sometimes decide to sit on the red tile that's about to take the damage.

But all that had a much smaller impact than just investing time in the game. Where my first run through the first (of four) maps was blatantly unwinnable, return trips provided a way to grind out resources.

It's at once satisfying to see my mech's stats tripled, and frustrating to know I never had a chance before. That pursuit of power is going to be like catnip for some, but I'd have been more smitten with *Grit and Valor* if it rewarded tactics over tenacity. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Stylish and often satisfying, but surviving *Grit and Valor*'s later campaigns demands persistence over tactics.

74

SO-SO SUIKO

SUIKODEN's HD remaster is polished to a high shine – in some places

By Kerry Brunskill

Almost 30 years later, *Suikoden 1* and *2* are marvellous adventures that expertly combine supernatural shenanigans with the more worldly horrors of bloody war and the politics behind them, sprinkling the experience with just enough silly minigames and collectables to give them balance. These remasters remain so close to the originals I can follow old walkthroughs find and the same friends in the same places.

Even today, these stories stand out. Sometimes the greater good must be fought for at any cost, and sometimes it's worth throwing it all away for a childhood friend. The retro-blunt nature of the text, everything short and to the point, only enhances these dramatic scenes.

My allies don't just fight alongside the lead characters in battle, they can also add new features to my home base, even providing my own personal teleportation services. There's always someone new to recruit just around the corner – or someone new to fight.

Regular fights are snappy and chaotic, often showing multiple characters from my team of six leaping into the fray at once. The view constantly shifts as this goes on,

offering an exciting close-up view of a sneaky counterattack, or pulling back to give a powerful spell room to show its full effect.

New to this collection is the ability to speed up these (and only these) encounters, although as this also

speeds up the music to match I generally preferred to wait a few seconds longer for a bout to finish than subject my ears to ruined tunes.

Dramatic duels also pop up every now and then, tense rock-paper-

scissors challenges where I have to guess what my opponent will do next. On the opposite end of the scale are army battles, with thousands of soldiers mobilised at once. In *Suikoden 1* these broadly follow the duel rules, while in *Suikoden 2* these

New to this collection is the ability to speed up the encounters

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Two classic RPGs given an inconsistent polish

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Konami

PUBLISHER
Konami

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700HQ,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
konami.com/games/suikoden/rem/1_2/us/en-us

are more thoughtful strategy RPG style affairs featuring multiple units on a grid-based battlefield. More than simple variety, these disparate styles breathe life into both game's conflicts, some things just too important for a standard party to handle.

Party members can permanently die due to nothing more than sheer bad luck in the army-sized battles, and this is sadly not the only obvious rough spot that hasn't been polished out of these remasters.

One semi-modern convenience that's absent from both games is the ability to save anywhere, or even just suspend the games at will. The best this has to offer is an infrequent autosave that only activates in rooms I can save in anyway. It's so useless it's almost insulting.

MORE IS LESS

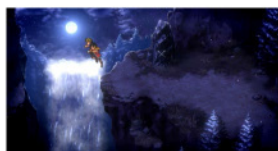
The first game conspicuously lacks the grander parts of the HD remaster's graphical upgrades. In *Suikoden 2* moonlight shines down on a dramatic escape and 3D battlefields are packed with fresh flourishes. *Suikoden 1* tends to look sparse and sterile in comparison, lacking the clutter that would distract from its



TOP: It needs a little work, but this is (eventually) home.



These two can't catch a break.



ABOVE: *Suikoden 2*'s redrawn backgrounds are often stunning.

ABOVE RIGHT: Lean a little to the left? Or the right?



sharp edges. Shop counters are slabs of brown, and everyone seems to possess the same wooden stool.

Other new features fare better. For the first time ever, these games have difficulty levels, and remembering where I need to go next has never been easier, thanks to a conversation log that allows me to save key pieces of information for later reference.

All of the extras introduced in the Japanese PSP release are also included in some form, with diagonal movement the most substantial of the lot. It's still clear these games weren't created with it in mind, but these corner-cutting jogs are so convenient it doesn't matter. The PSP's gallery returns too, although the decision to only allow me to rewatch events I've already cleared after I've finished a game remains a bizarre one.

These are fantastic RPGs wrapped up in a middling remaster. Many of the new additions have simply been lifted straight from a PSP remake, and rarely address anything that needed improving. An inconsistent lick of paint that highlights as many flaws as it hides and some additional difficulty levels really are the only significant unique features here. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

These are decent enough remasters of the *Suikoden* games but not the outstanding ones these RPGs deserved.

79

Remastered spells have a newfound oomph to them.



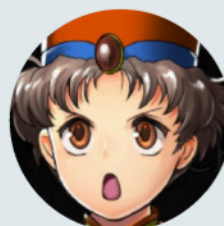
A LITTLE HELP, PLEASE?

Many of the heroes are warriors, and then there are these guys



KASIOS

I'm not sure a sound test is going to be much use in a defensive siege, but they seem happy enough.



QLON

Qlon's special skill is saying the name of wherever they're standing. That's it. No, I'm not kidding.



VIKI

All teleportation magic is handled by a woman who has no idea where or when she is. It'll probably be fine. Probably.

Energy: 2

- 2 // Get up
- 3 // Shower
- 4 // Cook
- 1 // Order food
- 2 // Eat mom's food
- 4 // Do the dishes
- 4 // Do the laundry
- 2 // Use phone
- 4 // Read
- 1 // Watch TV
- 5 // Exercise
- 0 // Go to bed

Desire: 7

25 // Play guitar



The presentation is fascinating, as if we're viewing the game through a crystal ball.

BIRDSONG

Energy is hard to come by in **VENDRÁN LAS AVES**

Vendrán las aves ('The birds will come', according to the internet) is a game about dealing with work-induced burnout – or not dealing, as the case may be. In this narrative time management game from the developer of *The Red Strings Club*, you've taken a year off from your job and bought a new electric guitar, which is surely the perfect recipe for a year of joyful musical expression from the comfort of your flat.

Er, about that. Turns out humans rely on (checks notes) energy, which is in short supply after work has drained the last joule from you. So while you might want to 'shred' your 'axe' (how do you do, fellow musos), the reality is that you have just enough energy to have a shower or cook a hot meal – but not usually both. It's a frustrating game to play, and that's just the right tone as it's a frustrating place to be in life, with all the time in the world at your disposal but you just can't will yourself to do what you want to.

Vendrán creates this frustration through its game mechanics. Every day, you have a certain amount of energy to use and an unchanging list of activities, including doing the dishes and watching TV. Reading

– one of the most valuable uses of anyone's time – takes up a whopping 4 energy, but you probably won't have enough left to wash your clothes or, well, to eat.

Some days I seemed to have loads of energy, and some days none

HIGH COSTS

With such high costs for doing worthwhile things, you ultimately fall back on watching TV or looking at your phone, cheap actions that make the character feel hollow and that seem to have a

knock-on effect on the next day. I say 'seem to' because I was never able to figure out quite how the energy system works. Some days I seemed to have loads of energy, and some days none, while my 'desire' stat to play the guitar would gradually increase, with no mention why.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game about struggling to do anything when you're suffering from burnout

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Deconstructeam

PUBLISHER
Deconstructeam

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Vendrán

UP AND AT THEM

It was never clear whether my energy was as changeable as the tide, or whether I was having an effect by making the 'right' choices in a day. Ultimately, it might be that burnout is just something you have to ride out, and not try to overcome, but I was interested to see if you could 'fail' the game, and I'm still unsure.

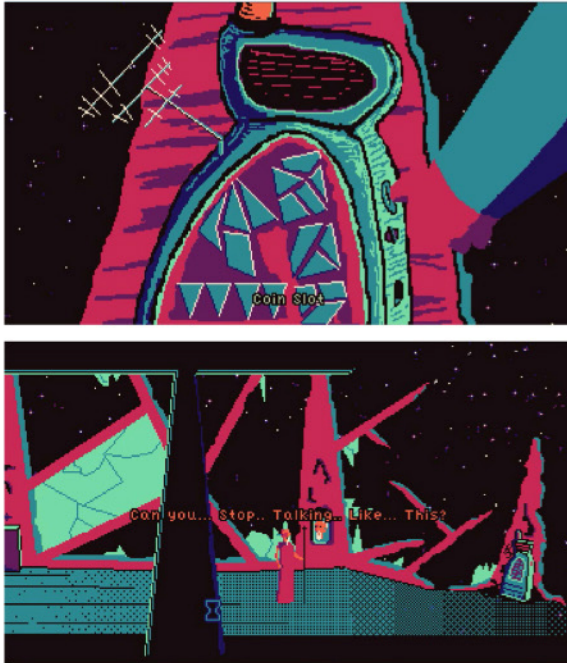
There is a goal, implied by the text on the right of the screen, "Play guitar." This doesn't require energy, but a second resource, desire, which steadily builds (or at least it did for me) as the game goes on. I hoped I was making that number go up quicker, but even if it's all just an illusion, it was exciting to finally reach that desire threshold. I won't spoil the ending, which ultimately ends somewhere beautiful to show the joy that can (eventually) exist on the other side of work. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

It could explain itself better, but *Vendrán las Aves* is a game that will undoubtedly speak to a lot of people.

76

BELOW: The ultimate puzzle is working out how to operate this machine.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
jfrisby

LINK
bit.ly/SphinxTime

TIME WAITS

Make time for **THE SPHINX OF TIME**

It's the rare adventure game these days that prioritises puzzles, so it was a delight to fire up *The Sphinx of Time* and be presented with puzzles that would fit in nicely in the genre's golden age. Time has stopped, and you've flown to a space museum to start it.

In your mission to summon the *Sphinx of Time*, who has the power to repair the universe, you have to switch on and operate an alien machine, although this is easier said than done. It's a puzzle that will have you travelling back and forth through the museum, making notes as you switch between two characters. I cheated a bit to get me on the right track, like I do in most adventure games, but it still required a lot of working out, of putting an actual pen to actual paper, and it was satisfying when I arrived at the correct answer.

The aesthetic of *Sphinx of Time* is impressive as well too, with its colour palette comprised overwhelmingly of sumptuous purples and reds, and its giant, detailed character sprites that are full of personality, if quite static in their actual animation. It's a funny game, retaining a consistently silly tone throughout, even if nothing ever lives up to the punchline shock of its Douglas Adams-esque opening moments just as much.

I do have a nitpick, one I rarely come across in point and click games: the size of the hotspots for scenery items is often too damn small. You have to move the mouse with surgical precision to interact with many of the objects in the game, or even to see them in the first place. It's hardly a dealbreaker, but a nuisance all the same as you puzzle your way towards the game's trippy conclusion. ■

79

FLIP SERVICE

Selling on the ceiling in **GRAVITY BOOTS SALESMAN**

People need their gravity boots, particularly people floating in mid-air, and it's your job to supply them in this lovely platform game, which has you selling as fast as you can. You have your own pair, which certainly helps as you invert gravity to help all the folks floating off the ceiling.

An obvious touchstone for *Gravity Boots Salesman* is Terry Cavanagh's VVVVVV, but this is a looser, friendlier game with no fail conditions and only your high score to beat. You get a point for every person you help, and you do this by mixing crafting components and taking the resulting boots to one of the customers floating on this planet.

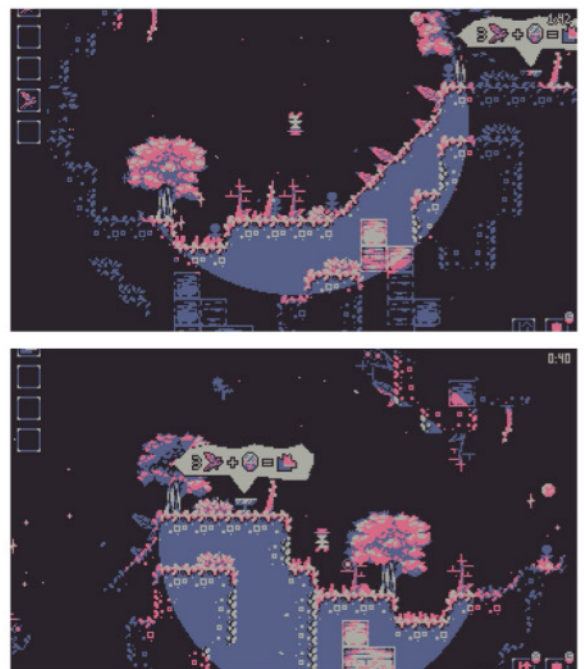
That's one way to play the game, but let me share a different tactic with you. You can use your cash to buy optional upgrades that will give

you more mid-air jumps or let you hold more crafting components.

It's a wee Metroidvania, optionally. You could also just run back and forth from the crafting station, seeking customers that have wandered near the ground, and that's a legitimate way to rake in the points. However you accrue them, after five minutes your time is over. Perhaps you'll try a different approach next time? The game could be tightened up a little. There's no need to explore the map for components, as the two resources grow very close to the crafting station and quickly refill. Meanwhile, customers tend to ping-pong all over the place with no consistency. That's a no-no for a score-based game, which should ideally be the same every time. But I wag my finger with a big inverted frown on my face. ■

76

BELOW: Every sale brings cash, which can be spent on upgrades.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
DaFluffyPotato

LINK
bit.ly/GravBoots

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



BAT MAN BEGINS

Embracing change in **YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON**

There's a zaniness to the *Yakuza* series that suggests a total disregard for normalcy and structure. It features men in their mid-50s who are capable of defeating hundreds of assailants. It's a series that finds excuses to feature dangerous predators with the express purpose of making you eventually batter them. At one point, in *Like a Dragon*, you fist fight a digger.

It's hopefully a measure of the game's ambition, then, when I say that the very structure of *Like a Dragon* represents the most absurdist move the series has ever pulled. Firstly, for the bulk of the game, it moves you out of the cosy neon glow of Kabukicho, the Shinjuku red-light district synonymous with the series. Then it introduces Ichiban Kasuga, an entirely new protagonist who feels like the capering comedy foil to the franchise's more serious heroes; a man whose enduring love of *Dragon Quest* translates to battering goons with a baseball bat on the streets of Yokohama. In a different world, he's a moral panic waiting to happen, like a cannibal who started chomping pills and making his own ghosts after

playing too much *Pac-Man*. But this isn't the game's most left-field swing.

The *Yakuza* games, as well as being soaring examinations of what it means to grow old in a society that no longer needs you, are about crushing bad guys' asses on bollards.

They're about picking up small, aggressive men and swinging them by their legs into other, similarly sized, similarly tempered men. They're about picking up signs you can't read for places you don't understand,

and using them to brutalise strangers. For the most part, these things aren't present in *Like a Dragon*.

ICHIBAN, TASTY

This is a worry, because I'm one of the few people who really likes the twitchy, beat 'em up elements of the

In a different world, he's a moral panic waiting to happen

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Dragon Quest but it's sad old men drinking tinned sake

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER
SEGA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.
com/app/1235140/
Yakuza_Like_a_Dragon/

Yakuza combat. The Dragon Engine, while wonderfully freeform, is less rewarding than the rigidity of earlier *Yakuza* games. Smashing menacing men through windows is less enjoyable, to me, than a well-timed Tiger Drop from *Yakuza 5*. So it's something of a shock to discover that I love the bright, turn-based balderdash of *Like a Dragon*. It's the sort of structural twist that could have been laughably awful, but, instead, it validates a more diverse cast of weirdos and expands the series past the realms of identikit criminals. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to believe that Nanba is actually breathing fire, or if it's all the damaged delusion of a man who spent 18 years in prison for nothing. But I do know it doesn't matter. There's so much humour, invention, and humanity here that it feels like I'm getting more of a world I adore, rather than less of a system I know. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

This one time I breakdanced an escaped bear into submission. This is why videogames exist.

88

BELOW: Give me a game where I play as the officious brigadier instead of the renegade.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£6

DEVELOPER
Westwood Studios

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

ONLY NOD FORGIVES

...in **COMMAND & CONQUER: RENEGADE**

The low hum of mild conversation at the ambassadorial reception. I take another Ferrero Rocher from the gilded tray and continue my anecdote. "And, in 2002, they released a *Command & Conquer* shooter, in which you could shift perspectives and play as a commando named Havoc!" Delighted titters from my rapt, handsome audience.

As you might gather, *Renegade* is a strange beast. The characterisation is hilariously broad. Havoc is like the evolution of Snake Plissken: a furious, angular wheelie bin of a man who has zero respect for his superiors. His superior is just a wall of medals with a head, who insists on being called sir then does nothing when it doesn't happen. One character's personality type is just 'woman'. And yet, when

the game begins, it's full of unexpected flourishes. Your officious commander will airdrop you supplies and an actual tank, which you can hop inside. There's even a beacon weapon which pre-dates the Hammer of Dawn from *Gears of War*, with which you can mark a target and call down a laser blast from a satellite. There's something about seeing the skies around you before it strikes that feels well before its time. The level of chaos you cause and control you have over the world feel like they might have been groundbreaking at the time, even if the run-and-gun framework within which they sit is flimsy. I assumed *Renegade* had been largely forgotten because it sits within the same drab tie-in hell as *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified*, but it's a study and as uncompromising as Captain Havoc himself. ■

68

VATS ALL FOLKS

Bottle caps and bombs in **FALLOUT 3**

Rounding off our collection of reinvented games is *Fallout 3*, foremost in a series that has seen more conceptual overhauls than dearly-missed human phantasmagoria David Bowie.

Going back to *Fallout 3* is like trying to recall a specific Christmas from your childhood. Memories merge with a hazier, collective sense of how it all felt. The tactile feel of tearing thin paper off a new toy is replaced by the joy of punching off a super mutant's head with a mechanical fist. Crisp winter mornings become leaden skies above a taupe wasteland. And, if I'm honest, my memories are more generous than the reality, especially since they merge with the superior *New Vegas*.

Much of *Fallout 3* is shaky. The VATS system is still thrilling, but

outside of that the guns feel like you're trying to discourage giant irradiated scorpions with flecks of spittle. The character models still look like haunted mannequins in a serial killer's night terror. And the main quest is underpinned by a Liam Neeson performance with all the energy and humanity of a concrete anti-terrorist bollard. Perhaps, more than this, is the erratic sense of humour that makes the Capital Wasteland feel like a funhouse. One moment you're taking a stand against slavery; the next, you're shooting fire-breathing ants. And yet, it's still wonderful. My yule log is the gentle crackle of drinking irradiated water; my winter hellscape. It's a game where no one moment stands out, but the collective memory is one of incongruous comfort in a world that's turned to ash. ■

BELOW: It's possible to find comfort in a game featuring hanging bodies.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£9

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

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JUNGLE
UPDATE



MAY 2025

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GROUP TEST

RAPID TRIGGER KEYBOARDS

These gaming keyboards are a cut above the rest, but which one is worthy of your hard-earned cash?

By Jacob Ridley





The first analogue gaming keyboard was released nearly ten years ago. The Wooting One. It promised a paradigm shift in keyboard movement, using specialised switches. These aren't your average mechanical numbers, they use optical sensors to monitor the entire range of a key's travel, top to bottom.

But it's no longer just Wooting in the game. It has spawned many alternatives, some of which I'm testing here today. Gone are the optical switches, replaced by Hall effect, and with so many options, I'm here to help you make the right choice.



1

2



3



80 HE

WOOTING **£184**

The original

1 One of the best examples of a modern Hall effect keyboard is the Wooting 80HE. It's a little extravagant for its see-through chassis and light bar, but it really stands out for its excellent software, the Wootility. Whoever came up with the name must be very proud of themselves, though the whole team behind it gets a pat on the back for how it works. It's by far the easiest software to use as a newcomer to analogue/rapid trigger keyboards and offers full tooltips, diagrams, and even highlights important on-screen information to help explain each of its many varied

functions. You need this stuff to use the Wooting 80HE to its fullest – most of all easy access to profiles, which the Wootility delivers. Once set up, this keyboard flies. The Lekker V2 switches in combination with the PBT or ABS keycaps are a little wobblier than some of the competition, but the 80HE has come on leaps and bounds compared to its predecessors. It feels great for typing, but more importantly slick and responsive.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- The best software
- Easy to use
- Feels quick

SPECS SIZE: TKL / **CONNECTIVITY**: WIRED / **RGB**: PER-KEY / **SWITCH**: LEKKER V2 / **SWITCH TYPE**: HALL EFFECT

Function Elite MiniTKL

NZXT **£170**

A new challenger

2 NZXT is a new challenger in the Hall effect keyboard game, and even so, it's done a great job with the Function Elite MiniTKL. This keyboard offers the feature set desired for competitive play, but importantly looks great doing so. That is, only if you like RGB LEDs everywhere.

This thing isn't short of a few LEDs, but I have to say I do quite like the overall look. Mostly because it's not left each RGB LED to dazzle on its own, and instead used a diffused cover to make the entire circumference lighting look like one long light bar. It looks especially good on

the white version of this gaming keyboard we have to hand, but try to keep it clean, OK?

NZXT's CAM software controls the lot, from lighting to rapid trigger. It's a software package I've had issues with in the past, but we generally ran into few with setting up this keyboard. With a competitive price tag on this one, it's a good pick of the bunch. Again, only if you don't mind a little mood lighting with your setup.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Looks great
- Compact design
- All the RGB

SPECS SIZE: COMPACT TKL / **CONNECTIVITY**: WIRED / **RGB**: PER-KEY + SURROUND / **SWITCH**: DUAL RAIL ADJUSTABLE MAGNETIC / **SWITCH TYPE**: HALL EFFECT

ONE OF THE MORE AFFORDABLE HALL EFFECT KEYBOARDS ON THE MARKET



GROUP TEST

Air60 HE

NUPHY **£128**

Low profile

3 This NuPhy is unlike any other Hall effect keyboard, in that it's the world's first with these specialised switches and a low-profile design. That's a pretty good claim to fame. What's more, it's very good for other important reasons. If you're looking for a low-profile keyboard and have a reasonable budget to spend, this is absolutely the one to go for. It's replaced the ROG Falchion LP as the best around for us, as it's extremely quick, affordable, and has tons of software customisation thanks to those clever switches. This isn't a one-trick pony. It's low-profile,

customisable, and extremely fast. It has a 0.1 mm actuation setting, lower than some others with similar Hall effect switches, and, for what it's worth, can be set to an 8,000Hz polling rate. That said, I've never noticed the difference between the usual 1,000Hz and 8,000Hz. Guess my synapses don't fire quick enough. Anyway, it's good for so much, and for such a good price, a lot of what it offers on top of the basics feels like a freebie.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tiny
- Great value
- Ridiculously quick

SPECS SIZE: 60% / **CONNECTIVITY**: WIRED / **RGB**: PER-KEY / **SWITCH**: GATERON LOW PROFILE MAGNETIC JADE PRO/JADE / **SWITCH TYPE**: HALL EFFECT

G Pro X TKL Rapid

LOGITECH **£170**

Affordable magnets

4 Logitech's first attempt at a rapid trigger gaming keyboard comes in the form of the Pro X TKL Rapid. This tells you all you need to know about it. It's rapid, it is a tenkeyless design lacking the numpad, and it's only for professional gamers. Nah, you're alright, too. Logitech's confusing naming aside, this is a lovely keyboard. It has PBT keycaps, media controls with a volume wheel, RGB lighting and, of course, magnetic switches. These allow this compact keeb to deliver the sort of features that make it worthy of this list, including a customisable

actuation, rapid trigger, and even Logitech's own form of the controversial SOCD, called Key Priority. You don't need to know about Key Priority, or SOCD, as it was mostly useful in *Counter-Strike* and Valve's already banned it. Instead, you should know this is one of the more affordable Hall effect keyboards on the market. It's not quite Keychron's K2 HE, though it's definitely more affordable than the SteelSeries over the page.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Well priced
- Well built
- Surprisingly loud

SPECS SIZE: TKL / **CONNECTIVITY**: WIRED / **RGB**: PER-KEY / **SWITCH**: MAGNETIC ANALOG SWITCHES / **SWITCH TYPE**: HALL EFFECT



GROUP TEST

**A KEYBOARD THAT
CAN COMPETE WITH
THE BEST OF THEM**

6

WHAT IS RAPID TRIGGER?

Rapid trigger is made possible using the same technology as full analogue movement. To explain how it works, here are the basics: when a key is depressed, a key press is registered. When it's released, the key press ceases and the switch resets. Usually this reset point is set in stone, decided by the mechanical switch's design.

However, analogue switches don't have a set reset or actuation point – that's all decided in software. Rapid trigger is a software tool that allows the reset point to happen immediately after a key is released, meaning the key can be pressed again that much sooner than with a mechanical switch.

Apex Pro TKL Gen 3

STEELSERIES £210

OLED's gonna cost ya

5 SteelSeries took the competitive gaming keyboard concept and ran with it for the Apex Pro TKL Gen 3. It uses the company's own OmniPoint 3 switches, which are a big step-up on previous versions, and they're lubed for a supremely slick action. This culminates in a keyboard that can compete with the best of them for feel while gaming and typing.

You might notice there's a small screen on the Apex Pro TKL Gen 3. That's a tiny OLED offering the ability to glimpse your PC's stats or change some settings on the fly, including rapid trigger and actuation. That's pretty

handy, as while a super-fast actuation is useful while gaming, it's a nightmare for just about any other job. It's a sure way to send an email full of typos, for example. Software is key to any competitive keyboard, and SteelSeries has a lot of options and profiles to play with, and while it's not the best software or always the most consistent, it does get the job done with the tiny screen in play for quick tweaks.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Lovely feel
- Useful screen
- Expensive

SPECS SIZE: TKL / **CONNECTIVITY:** WIRED / **RGB:** PER-KEY / **SWITCH:** OMNIPOINT 3 / **SWITCH TYPE:** HALL EFFECT

One X

DUCKY £180

Induction-powered

6 When I got the Ducky One X out of the box, I was very excited by it. It's gorgeous to type and game on, with its new-fangled induction switches offering crisp, smooth actuation all the way down. It feels solid, too. But it's a let-down in a few other ways that I simply cannot ignore. For starters, the software kinda sucks. You need the software to not only access its most impressive features but to also switch between them on-the-fly. The problem with the Ducky is that you can't switch between them at all. There are no profiles. This means you're stuck with gaming shortcuts when

you're typing, or low actuation when you're typing. It's just not pleasant to use day-to-day.

Then there's the issue with its new induction switches. These offer a similar feature set to Hall effect, but with prongs out the bottom. They're neat, but they're too loose inside the keyboard and come away easily when the switch is moved a little. Sadly, the Ducky's competitive price, wireless functionality and full-size layout can't save it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- New switch tech
- Lovely typing feel
- Poor software

SPECS SIZE: FULL-SIZE / **CONNECTIVITY:** WIRELESS / **RGB:** PER-KEY / **SWITCH:** DUCKY INDUCTION SWITCH / **SWITCH TYPE:** INDUCTION

COUNTER ARGUMENT

AI has made FPS meaningless – we need a new performance metric

Since the Earth's tectonic plates first cooled sufficiently to sustain living organisms, primitive life forms have been measuring their PCs' performance in games against one metric. That metric is framerate, and it's been utterly sacrosanct in PC gaming, an unmovable pillar around which the whole culture has been built.

And then AI frame gen came along, scrunched all that received wisdom up into a ball and blew a raspberry while tossing it nonchalantly over its shoulder into a bin. We're in a strange moment at the start of this RTX 5-series age, one in which framerate is no longer a precise enough metric to describe your experience of how smoothly you enjoy the game being delivered to your monitor, and just before anybody comes up with a better methodology. But before we can do that, we need to go back a little bit in order to identify why FPS isn't the unilaterally important stat it once was.

The measurement was devised for cinema, the first application of images being projected in rapid sequence onto a screen. In the early silent film days, cameras were hand-cranked and framerates varied between scenes to suit the mood, allowing the operator a bit of artistic expression.

Even in these earliest days, there was debate about how many frames the human eye can actually perceive in a second, and how many should appear in order to produce a satisfactory moving image which doesn't provoke eye strain or disturb the appearance of lifelike motion. Thomas Edison, arguably the first r/PCMasterRace redditor in history, posited that 48fps was necessary to fulfil those two factors.

This is the interesting thing from early cinema, though: even then, framerate was fudged in order to achieve a higher number. After the industry had arrived at 24fps as a standard, following the introduction of recorded sound to accompany the moving images, projectors with a two-blade shutter design were used to throw the reels onto cinema screens, doubling the outputted framerate by flashing each frame up on the screen twice and therefore achieving 48fps with half the frames of actual information. Edison's rule was adhered to, and cinemagoers enjoyed their evenings out without headaches. Later, three-shutter designs boosted those same 24fps recordings to 72fps cinema experiences.

THE MAGIC NUMBER

As for how 60 became the standard in gaming, it's down to the mains frequency of electrical grids. Television



Free the frame

While Nvidia has gate-kept frame-gen technology by keeping it exclusive to certain card generations, apps such as Lossless Scaling aim to give you the same thing for much less. Given that it's available on Steam for £3.49, it works about as well as you'd expect: tricky to interface with games and introduces latency. So while the game might look faster if you're not playing it, it feels slower. It's a microcosm of the wider issue, but at least it's trying to serve up the benefits without asking for anything like as much cash.



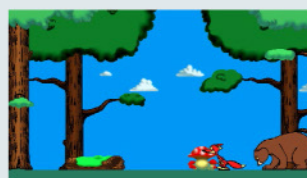
ROUNDHAY GARDEN SCENE

The oldest silent film on record, filmed in 1888 by one Louis Le Prince at a whopping 7fps.



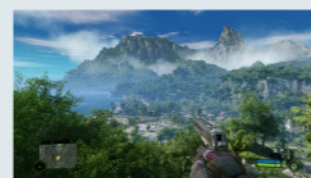
NIGHT OF DREAMS

Cinematic innovator Douglas Trumbull's short film was the first shot in 60fps, back in 1978.



FOX AND BEAR DEMO

The first DirectX application to support 60fps natively, running on Windows 95 and released in '96.



WHEN YOU HIT 60 IN CRYSIS

Some years after its release, probably about 2012, you finally managed it. The holy grail.

FAR LEFT: If we want to capture what PC gaming performance means, we need to think outside the box.

LEFT: Everyone's seeking software-level performance gains – Epic built its own frame-gen tech into UE5.

FRAPS ALL, FOLKS *Four great moments in framerate history*

broadcasters decided to sync their framerates to these electrical grids in order to achieve a reliable level of synchronisation – generally 50Hz or 60Hz, depending on the territory. PAL countries used 50Hz, NTSC used 60Hz.

Tech had moved on, but film and TV still used 24fps as their standard, which meant in order to sync to TV broadcast refresh rates – and the TVs' refresh rates, which followed suit, frames had to be doubled or tripled to hit 60.

And that's all useful background to keep in mind when we look at how frame gen has disrupted our precious metric in PC gaming. Because there used to be no such trickery in computing – the number you saw in the corner of your screen was the number of frames that your video card was outputting in one second. These were 60 pieces of visual information, arriving in sequence, and they were either synced to your monitor's refresh rate, or not synced. Those two variables gave you the only insight you needed into how well your components were meeting the demands of the game.

And that bore out in your user experience. Watching a 24fps cinematic production in a cinema never felt choppy, but playing a game at 24fps without the software safety net of frame duplication or synchronisation was noticeably jerky, to an experience-diminishing degree.

RATE OF CHANGE

And that finally brings us back to the present day, where the task of delivering virtual moving images to your eyes has migrated, since RTX 5-series' launch, from hardware to software. DLSS 4 multi-frame generation can deliver absurd

framerates, at 4K, in the most demanding scenarios. Fully path-traced *Cyberpunk* at 280fps is now an achievable reality.

But there's a disconnect here, between the number showing up on your screen and the smoothness, detail and agility of the experience in front of you. Frame gen introduces latency. The more frames are produced by software rather than hardware, the higher that latency is, and the more you feel it when you see your inputs affecting the game world.

Frame time, or pacing, isn't a given when you're relying on software-generated frames, and at 4x MFG you're increasing the likelihood of artefacts. In other words, some other quite important aspects of 'performance' go down as MFG framerate goes up.

And that's why the conversation we have about performance has to evolve. There are definite benefits to frame gen that go beyond seeing a number that's

preposterously high, but having been collectively so obsessed with that number for so long, we should be cautious not to have it brandished as a hollowed-out marketing totem by manufacturers who count on us to overlook the other elements that constitute an enjoyable experience.

The benefits would be innumerable. We could quantify why late-'90s arcade games still feel smoother than G-Synced, MFG-ed modern titles. We'd pinpoint exactly where we want manufacturers to focus their efforts in this uncertain, software-led future of GPU design. Most importantly, we'd have an effortless rebuttal ready for the compulsive frame-counters who find a sense of moral and intellectual superiority in the GeForce in-game overlay. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

THE CONVERSATION WE HAVE ABOUT PERFORMANCE HAS TO EVOLVE

MEDIUM WELL DONE

GPU upgrades aren't coming soon – time to make peace with average performance

Here are three things that recently happened to me: *Until Dawn* released in remastered form for PC. *NBA 2K25* happened. Nvidia launched its new generation of GPUs but then forgot to manufacture any. To the untrained eye these might appear to be unrelated, but I see them for what they are, a triumvirate of conspirators hellbent on forcing me to come to terms with playing things at 40fps and/or some graphics options turned down to medium.

Supermassive's interactive teen slasher flick was never exactly esports-grade optimised over on PlayStation, so I shouldn't have been surprised that my RTX 2080 Ti would have its work cut out to render all those snowy footprints and blood smears at max settings. This alone would not have been a significant event.

For *NBA 2K*'s part, it's not that the pixel fidelity's screaming out 'I need absolutely all your CUDA cores!' when it hits my monitor. It just... doesn't run very well. Some say it's about the DRM. Whatever the root cause, it's pretty hard to nail those perfect jumpshot releases when the game freezes this often.

My plan was to finally retire the long-serving 2080 Ti and buy a 5090. That was before the benchmarks landed, and the focus was placed so squarely on multi-frame gen. And, of course, before UK retailers were reporting single figure stocks of the card at launch.

And so, with 4-series cards quietly discontinued and all existing stock bought up, and with the chance to buy a 5-series card for something close to MSRP in the near future merely a giddy dream, I was stuck with the 2080 Ti. I'm not the only one in this situation, stranded on 2-series island, watching the 4-series ferry cruise off into the horizon. There's a whole community of us, cradling our Wilsons and shouting into the uncaring sky, and for the foreseeable, we must learn to love stuttering, imperfect games. It was upon reaching this realisation that I decided

it was time to start turning some options down. It feels like finally admitting defeat, heading into that menu to turn the shadows down or try a different AA technique. Or, worst case scenario, enable Super Resolution. But if I was to truly decouple from worrying about performance, first I had to find a performance level that ran my troublesome games fast enough that I could play them without my inputs being impeded by framerate.

What's striking about this process is how utterly minuscule the differences really are between a maxed-out rendered image and one with a few compromises. Unless you're lowering the output resolution – and thankfully I didn't have to – you actively have to look for the differences. There's something comforting about that.

Until Dawn is impressively scalable in GPU resource demand without giving up much fidelity. Over on the virtual court, though, *NBA 2K25* doesn't have many high-end trinkets to be turned down in the first place. It took a lot of adjustment to arrive at a slightly more stable framerate, and although stuttering and freezing still occurs even at the lowest settings, it's lessened when you take some load off the GDDR usage.

IT TOOK A LOT OF ADJUSTMENT TO ARRIVE AT A MORE STABLE FRAMERATE

LOSING COUNT

So, with a few minutes of setting tinkering and only a faint sense of humiliation, I'd achieved fairly consistent and smooth experiences in both games. The next step towards this noble endeavour was to disable Nvidia's frame counter overlay. It's a small thing, but a constant attention-diverter, that little green number readout. When I first turned it off I felt like I was flying blind. I missed it. But quite quickly I stopped thinking about it, and re-trained my neural pathways not to send my eyes over to the top-right of the screen whenever something stuttered for a microsecond. In turn, I began to focus more on events happening in the game world than on how well my hardware was rendering it.

And that's how things have been for the past couple of months. As a recovering medium settings-phobe, the



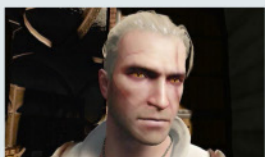
PHIL IWANIK
Nobody's sure how old long-time freelancer Phil is at this point, having turned off his IRL frame-counter some years ago.

30FPS, FLIRTY AND THRIVING *Four tips about turning your graphics settings down*



MOVE TO ALDERSHOT

After conducting your daily affairs in this UK hotspot, *STALKER 2* on medium looks alright.



START LOW

Play the first hour of every new game on the lowest settings. Now medium's an improvement.



TOUCH SOME GRASS

Those who say this are onto something – next to the jaggies in nature, 2XTAA looks decent.



KEEP £2,000 CASH NEARBY

Place a wad equivalent to the RTX 5090's price and when you want to turn soft shadows on, glance at it.



practice of shifting my focus back to the game has been gratifying to say the least. I think I worry less about the stutters when they happen, and when a new game arrives I don't get flushed in the cheeks about turning a few settings down. It's also helped me to see that in my particular experience, worrying about performance was a form of procrastination. It was an excuse not to actually commit the time to playing the game.

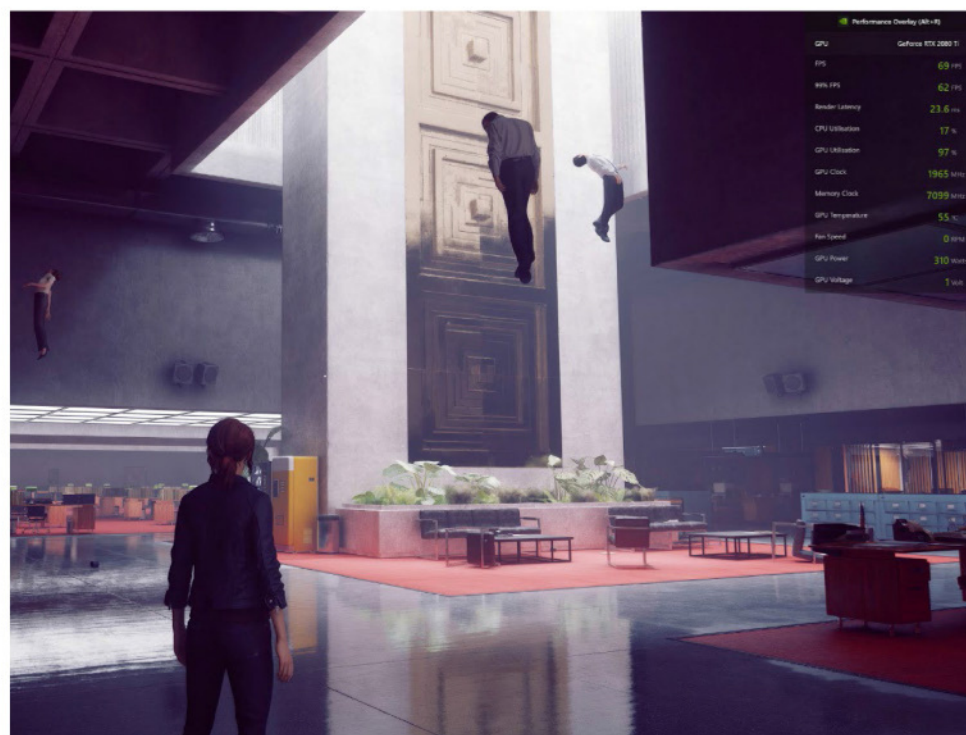
There's a big caveat looming over the experience though: I'm only a temporary visitor to this more enlightened place. I haven't sold my earthly belongings and committed to this path. I'm just embracing it as a break from the norm until a GPU upgrade becomes viable again.

How I'll laugh to myself, like a medieval king at a feast, when I build my new system and turn everything back up to max. Or, how I'll appreciate the small details. I'll seek out the titles that I've temporarily shelved, and then I'll whack a dirty great path tracing mod on them. Until then, I've made my peace with the medium side of the medium. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: For many of us, the pile of 'after the upgrade' games is stacking up.

BELOW: Turning off the frame counter is a great first step towards letting go.



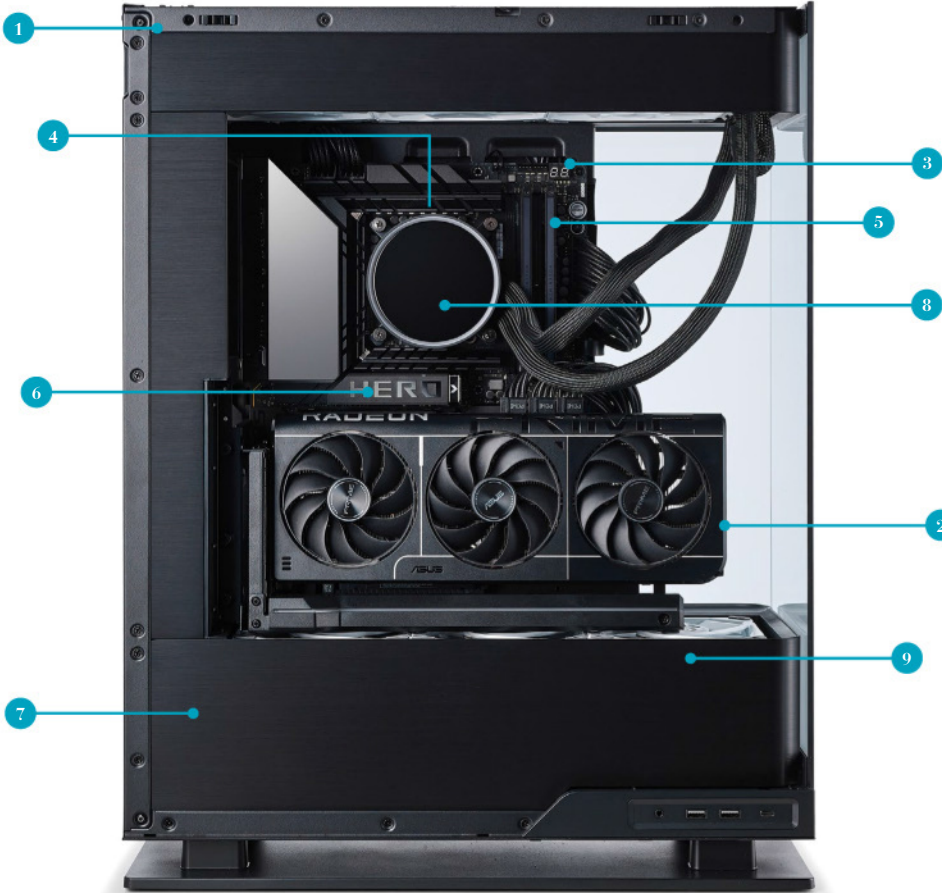
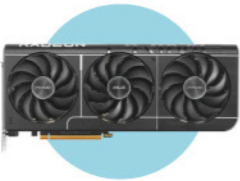
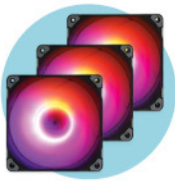
THE BUILD

The 9070 XT Obelisk

By Zak Storey



TOTAL COST £2,878

1 CASE	 Evolv X2 Phanteks £129 Big, bold, and beautiful. Phanteks' Evolv line has always been impressive, ever since the launch of that aluminum-clad first edition back in 2015. Since then the line-up hasn't really seen any major changes, outside of a bit of RGB here and there and some slight tweaks to the internal layout. That is until the Evolv X2 landed with us. Phanteks has thrown the old design out entirely, instead opting for this awesome obelisk-style design, complete with that panoramic, all-glass surround fishbowl style that's become so popular.	2 GRAPHICS CARD
		 Prime OC Radeon RX 9070 XT 16GB Asus £720 AMD is producing RTX 5070 Ti performance for a far more acceptable price.
		3 MOTHERBOARD
9 FANS	8 COOLER	4 PROCESSOR
 M25-120 PWM D-RGB Phanteks £58 Crisp, clean and affordable, you can pick up a triple-pack kit of these daisy-chainable Phanteks fans for £29.	 Kraken Elite 360 RGB 2024 NZXT £260 With a OLED display and a radiator, this thing's more than enough to keep our core cool.	 Core Ultra 7 265K Intel £323 The Ultra 7 is a tempting proposition – 20 cores at its disposal and a 5.5GHz max clock speed.
7 POWER SUPPLY	6 SSD	5 MEMORY
 AMP GH 1000 Phanteks £156 Phanteks' AMP lineup is super compact, impressively quiet, and is ATX 3.0 compliant.	 9100 Pro 4TB Samsung £440 Pure gluttony, that's what we have here. Samsung's finally joined the PCIe 5.0 SSD ranks with the 9100 Pro.	 Dominator Titanium DDR5-7200 32GB Corsair £175 With 32GB and a real slick 7200MT/s speed, it's more than enough for gaming.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

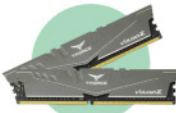
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,015

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £150 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £250 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		RM650 80 Plus Corsair £80 A great power supply is a must, and Corsair builds some reliable workhorses. This one's a good balance of price and power.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £60 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £150 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £50 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,588

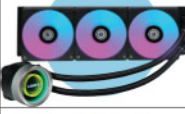
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £160 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £285 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £400 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £70 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £200 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

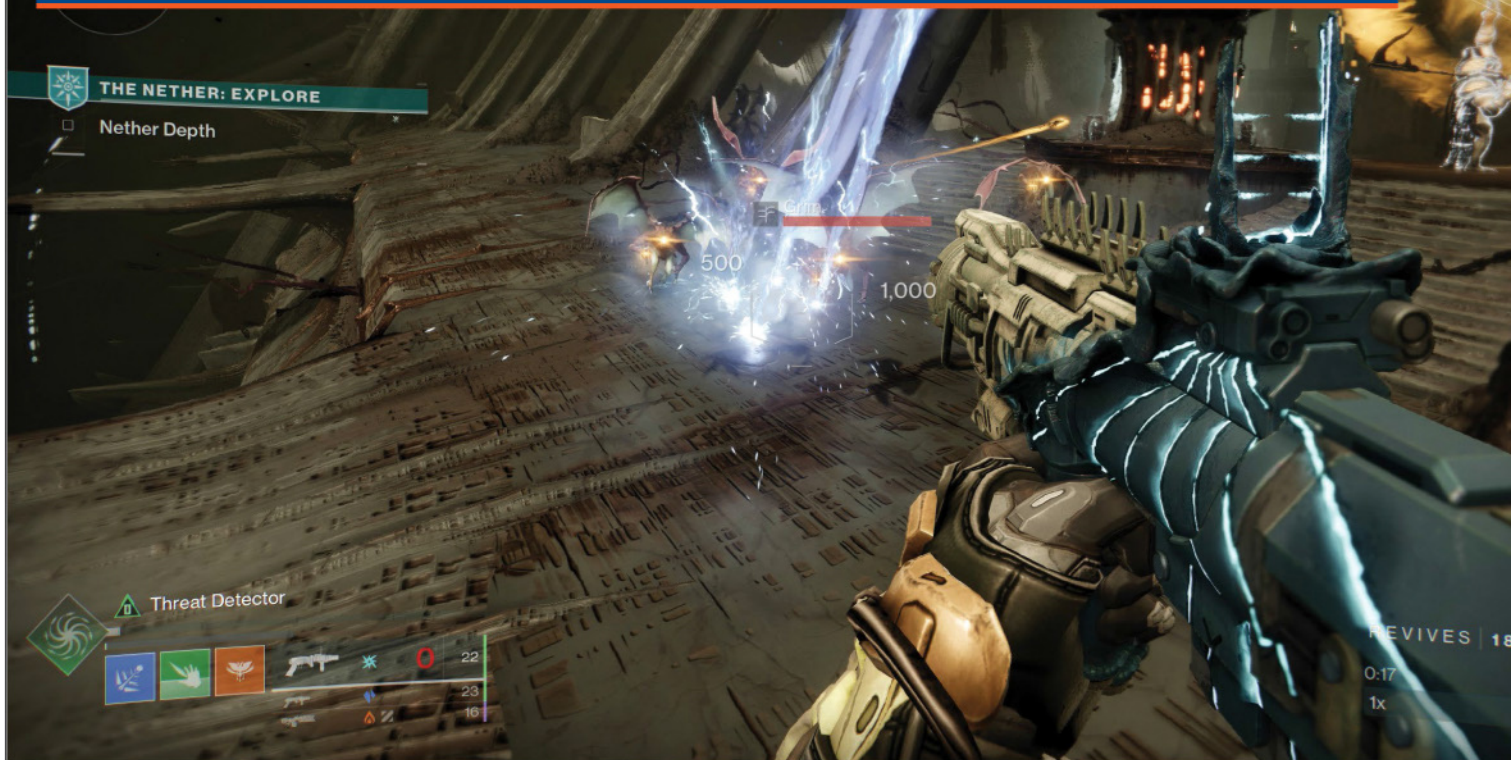


TOTAL
£6,221

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £500 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 9800X3D AMD £450 The upcoming Zen 5 top-end X3D models will have more cores, but for gaming this is the bee's knees.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,000 The RTX 5090 is the new king of GPUs, offering some tasty DLSS 4 extras – if you can find one, that is.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £150 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £420 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £250 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £190 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“Going in on sliding and on creating even more lightning from lightning”

Seeking perfection in **DESTINY 2**

What a difference a spot of nostalgia can make. Back in January it felt like Bungie could do nothing right – a weak, overly grindy season compounding more longstanding complaints to create some truly rancid vibes among the *Destiny 2* community. The playerbase dwindled. The subreddit revolted. The future looked bleak.

And then Bungie released a new episode, Heresy, and suddenly *Destiny 2* was good again. I could be glib and chalk this down to Bungie pressing the emergency ‘deploy fan-favourite location’ button, but it’s deeper than that. The return of *Destiny 1*’s Dreadnaught is a welcome chance to revisit a beloved slice of the game’s history. And the reemergence of Oryx has piqued players’ interest.

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Returned to the scene of the grind.

ALSO PLAYED
Kingdom Come: Deliverance II

This is all good stuff – a much needed departure from the tedium of the last big update. But really it’s just window dressing for what really matters: the guns. Last season’s weapons were mid, and therefore the game was bad. This season, they’re not, and so now I’m too busy to notice all of the many annoyances that still exist within the game.

My main reason for playing right now is Psychopomp, one of the few area-denial grenade launchers currently available in the game. These carpet-bomb the area with a

TOP: Sorry Grim, my gun is full of lightning.

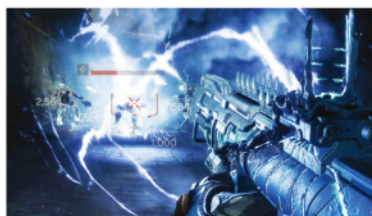
burst of elemental napalm, damaging everything that steps into them. The two previous area-denial frames have been solid workhorses that have seen plenty of use in my loadouts. But Psychopomp uses the Arc element, and contains a new perk – Rolling Storm – that synergises with the new arc subclass buff Bolt Charge.

With Bolt Charge, you build up stacks that generate a big bolt of lightning when you use an ability – damaging every enemy it hits.

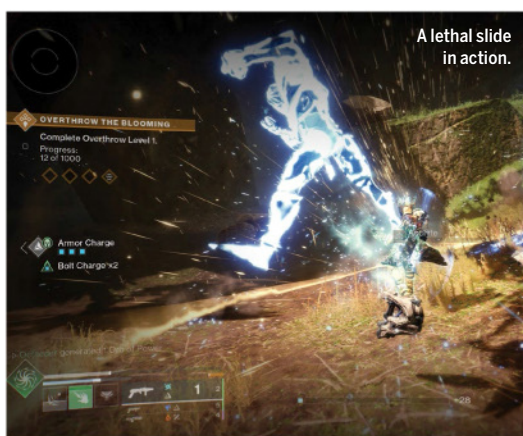
CHARGING UP

Here’s the vision: a Prismatic Warlock with the Lightning Surge

PSYCHOPOMP CAN ALSO ROLL WITH PUGILIST IN ITS OTHER PERK COLUMN



A lethal slide in action.



and Devour aspects. The former is a sliding melee attack that generates lightning strikes that chain and build Bolt Charge. The latter fully heals me for every ability kill. I slide in, killing everything around with a storm of lightning, healing to full, and generating Bolt Charge that, when full, generates more and bigger lightning. I'm going all in on sliding, on lightning, and on creating even more lightning from my lightning.

The build is, effectively, complete. But therein lies the sickness. The version I have is good, but it could be perfect. Psychopomp can also roll with Pugilist in its other perk column, boosting my melee recharge rate – meaning I can trigger my melee slides more frequently. If searching for the perfect god roll wasn't enough, this season Bungie has introduced ultra-rare adept versions, which have a different skin and slightly better mod options. Do I need this? Will having it actually improve my build by a meaningful, perceptible degree? Probably not. Do I want this, though? You bet I do. And so I head back to the Dreadnaught in search of a marginal improvement. After all, *Destiny 2* is good again. I might as well make the most of it while it lasts. ■



Burn headcrab burn.

“Ravenholm looks spookier than ever”

Admiring the ray-traced world of **HALF-LIFE 2 RTX**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Rode the Black Mesa Transit System to Nando's.

ALSO PLAYED
Final Doom, Pandemonium!

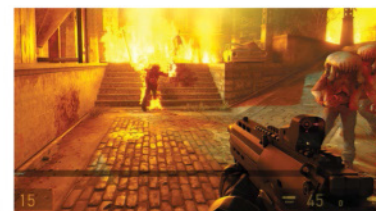
The *Half-Life RTX* demo is now out, so I thought I'd give this fully retraced remake of the classic FPS a whirl. And, while there are currently only the Ravenholm and Nova Prospect levels available to play through, rather than the full game, what we've got here sure is damn impressive. Well, it's damn impressive providing you have the graphics card to run it, with my GeForce RTX 3090 Ti system puffing to run the game at a high framerate on Ultra settings at 4K resolution. So, why is that?

Half-Life 2 RTX is an unofficial, modder-led remaster of *Half-Life 2* that is built using Nvidia's RTX Remix modding platform, and that means that while you need to have a copy of the original game to play it, this version is very much running on Remix rendering engine and not the original game's. While that adds load to the system running *Half-Life 2 RTX*, it does mean that there is a powerful graphics menu of options to tinker with that far outstrips anything that was possible in the original game. For example, you can enable

DLSS modes, as well as choose rendering quality and toggle motion blur, chromatic aberration and vignetting on and off as desired.

I'M SCARED

Half-Life 2 RTX transforms how this classic FPS looks and, even better, feels. With fully ray-traced lighting, as well as extra visual enhancements such as RTX Skin, which transforms how fleshy things like headcrabs look, the abandoned mining town of Ravenholm looks spookier than ever. Possessed, headcrab-controlled humans shamle out of the dark, with you not seeing them until the last minute. Shadows cast from spotlights elongate out like tendrils across broken shacks and ruined warehouses. While fog and mist hang in the air, diffused lighting gently filtering through, thickening the sense of dread as you hear the howl of a fast zombie approaching. And then there are the fires. Explosive barrels light up the bloody mess that they leave with a flash. Zombies, cut in half via a sawblade, crawl towards you on fire while shrieking, their glow gently lighting up the surrounding corridor. And muzzle flashes crackle in the dark. ■



“I get to work on placing more towers, massive pyramids and blocky offices”

Building a dystopia is fine, so long as it's like Blade Runner in **DYSTOPIKA**

Somehow finding time in between saving the Living Lands from a fungal soul plague and hunting monsters to fashion them into fancy clothes, I've taken to building rather than destroying. You'd think I'd have made the natural choice of a cosy farming sim like *Stardew Valley*. “Screw that,” I exclaimed as I looked at my mess of *Stardew* mods, finding the task of updating them all too much bother, “Let's build a dystopian hellscape!”

In *Dystopika*, you're free to create your own futuristic city using a variety of buildings, decorations and procedurally generated features. Piecing these together, you'll quickly construct a concrete jungle. A neon-drenched ecumenopolis.

NEON DREAMS

When I first boot up *Dystopika*, I'm greeted by a shadowy expanse begging to be painted with gloomy skyscrapers and factories. Take a closer look and you'll see that this canvas is actually already a city. The specs of light are masts and

RORY NORRIS



THIS MONTH
Created a dystopian nightmare, but it looks cool so it's fine.

ALSO PLAYED
Avowed, *Monster Hunter Wilds*

apartment block windows, with vague shapes hiding in the darkness. If there's already a city here, then why do we need to build another, you ask? Well, the city you build in *Dystopika* overshadows even this, with even more gargantuan constructions protruding upwards.

At first, I'm placing skyscrapers almost at random with the help of the game's handy randomiser tool. I'm simply handed a different building style each time I'm ready to place a structure. I instinctively tweak each building's height to the maximum, and the nearby

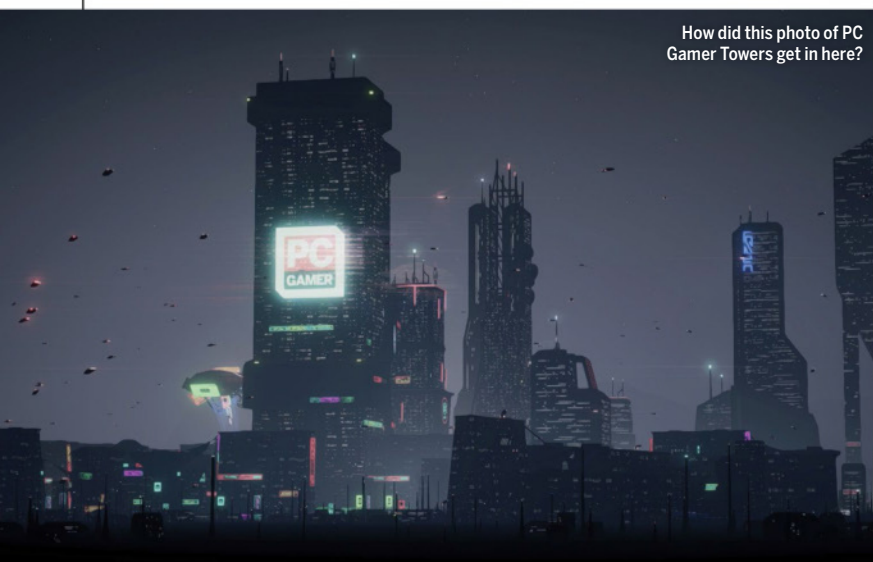
surroundings – the shadowy mass-bellows up with it.

Then, I discover the Light Brush. It turns out, with just one click I can paint an entire area with neon signs and lights. Moments later that city block bursts to life – if you can call it that. Quickly, I get to work on placing more towers, massive pyramids and blocky office buildings until eventually I've effectively made my own Night City – complete with smoke billowing out of every rooftop.

Adopting a very detached, less immersive perspective compared to the likes of *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Dystopika* is oddly serene in this way. The synth music washes over me carrying me to an almost meditative state where I build. I'm not so much concerned with the fact that I'm building the very capitalistic hellscape criticised in the media that obviously influenced *Dystopika*.

With simple controls, no resources to manage, or even complex systems to navigate, *Dystopika* is an oddly relaxing homage to your favourite dystopian sci-fi. It's admittedly bare-bones but it's the perfect dark side of the blossoming cosy game genre. And I love it. ■

I'M GREETED BY A SHADOWY EXPANSE BEGGING TO BE PAINTED WITH SKYSCRAPERS



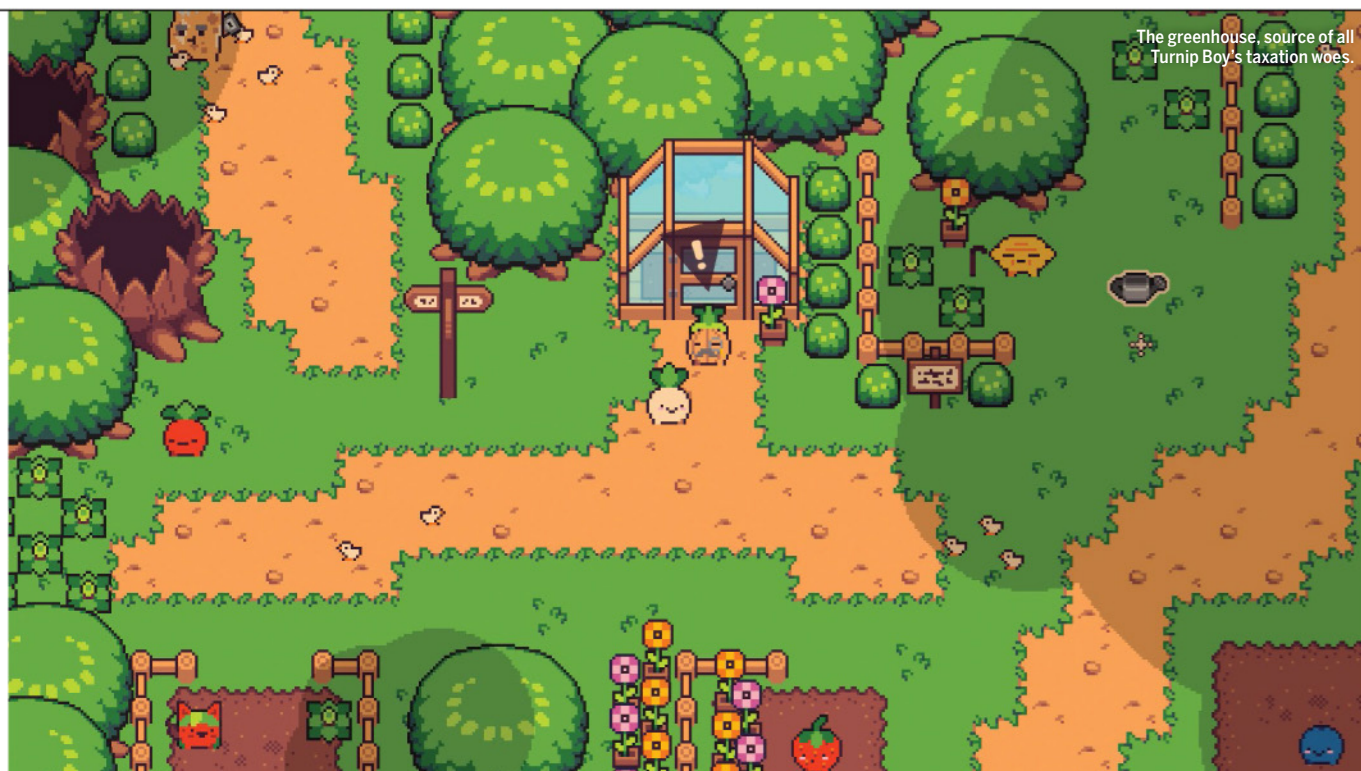
How did this photo of PC Gamer Towers get in here?



LEFT: Decorating my sci-fi city with adverts bigger than my house.



BELOW: Increasing the height of a building is a great way to quickly build up the surrounding area.



“Turnip Boy is more than an accountant’s worst nightmare”

TURNIP BOY COMMITS TAX EVASION offers the chance to have a ripping good time

As someone who’s been playing games since he was six, I’ve committed a lot of crimes. Some of them have been the kind you’d think were cute if a dog did them, such as petty pilfering for comedy purposes and graffiti. Though if your dog can do graffiti you might want to get that on TV rather than sitting there reading a magazine.

Obviously, all this crime is cancelled out by the sheer number of times I’ve saved the universe, in recognition of which I should have been left immune from taxation for the rest of my life and the recipient of free lattes every time I go into a coffee shop. But life’s never fair, is it?

What I haven’t done, up to this point, is commit tax evasion. I’ve made plenty of people pay me taxes, and sometimes I’ve used that money for the betterment of their lives by building airports and fast transit systems with it, but to evade paying it? Deliberately? That’s a new one. Does not paying tax in a game that

▶ IAN EVENDEN



THIS MONTH
Destroyed things with wanton abandon. And in the game...

ALSO PLAYED
Crysis, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*

doesn’t incorporate it as a mechanic count? Probably not. Turnip Boy is more than an accountant’s worst nightmare. He’s a genuine menace to society. Every time he comes across an important document, he rips it up. He doesn’t have to do it – there’s always a choice – but somehow he always grips the paperwork in his little rooty hands and does the worst.

TOTAL SMOOTHIE

Possibly the worst example of this unjustifiable amoral conduct is when

EVERY TIME HE COMES ACROSS AN IMPORTANT DOCUMENT, HE RIPS IT UP

Turnip Boy comes across a love letter. Strawberry is in love with Blueberry. In return for being given a flower, Strawberry asks the blushing blue babe out on a date, and is even brave enough to suggest they might get married and pay taxes together.

Anything that mentions the T word is going in the bin, and the letter is soon in pieces. It’s bad behaviour, sure, but there’s a \$1 reward on Turnip Boy’s head, and he’s not about to surrender to the baying crowd of money-hungry fruits and vegetables if he can help it.

Speaking of money, Turnip Boy owes the government \$143,753, plus interest, on his greenhouse – a clear case of government overreach and persecution of the little man.

Eventually he’ll be able to commit further crimes, beating the mayor of Veggieville to get the deed to his home back. Two wrongs don’t make a right, however, and the hard little root veg that nobody likes is left to stew in the hot water he’s dumped himself into with his white-collar illegality. Crime shouldn’t pay, but in games it often does. ■



KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

Make Henry's medieval adventure a little easier (or harder). *By Christopher Livingston*

Kingdom Come: *Deliverance II*: it ain't *Skyrim*. That's not a criticism, mind you, just a hard truth. They're both RPGs, but *KCDII* is aiming for a more authentic experience when it comes to combat, travel, alchemy, and many of its other systems – heck, even wearing a helmet and putting the visor down isn't all that straightforward in *KCDII*.

The deliberate and meticulous nature of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s systems are a big part of what makes it such a great and immersive experience, but that doesn't mean everything about these systems is universally beloved. Tweaking a few systems to make them less labour intensive isn't unthinkable, which is why the mods that sprung up so quickly for

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 18, 2002

DEVELOPER
BioWare

PUBLISHER
Infogrames

LINK
store.steampowered.com

the RPG mostly focus on making the game a bit easier.

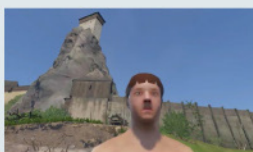
OUR SAVIOUR

The most popular mod for *KCDII* involves the most basic function of the game: saving your progress. Just like in the original *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, Henry needs to use a Savior Schnapps potion to manually save the game, otherwise he'll have to find a bed and sleep in it. That means collecting herbs and mixing them with wine at an alchemy bench – not a huge hassle, really, except when you just want to quickly save but realise you're completely out of the ingredients



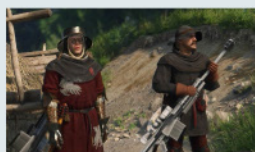
MEDIEVAL CRIMES

Some KCDII mods defy explanation



ULTRA-LOW GRAPHICS MODE

Immerse yourself in a version that looks like a *Mount & Blade*.



M82 BARRETT

This mod replaces medieval guns with a giant American-made semi-auto rifles.



SPHERE WORLD

It's all spheres, all the time. Animals, women, horses, doors, they're all spheres now.



EVERYONE LOVES HENRY

More like everyone is Henry: this mod replaces everyone's head in the game with Henry's head.



ABOVE: Make Henry's herb-picking adventure easier on his knees.

RIGHT: No need to brew potions just to save your game.



and nowhere near a crafting table. The *Unlimited Saving II* mod lets you do what the gods of PC gaming intended: save your game whenever the hell you damn well please. I get the idea behind Savior Schnapps, I really do: choices become less important if you can simply undo them and reload a save whenever you want. On the other hand: the heck with that. Sometimes I just wanna quicksave. Now I can.

There are all sorts of other little time-saving mods for *KCDII*, depending on how much you really want to streamline (some would say ruin) your game. Not everyone enjoys herb-gathering (I do) so there are few mods to make it less of a chore, even though that's exactly what it is. First, the mod called *Instant Herb Picking II* does away with the third-person animation that plays every time Henry picks a flower. Now you just press the button and the herb is in your pocket, like in *Skyrim*, instead of having to watch Henry squat for the thousandth time. If you want to keep the squatting but not have to watch a separate cutaway scene, there's also a mod called *1st Person Herb Picking II*, which keeps the camera inside your head, a nice compromise.

That's not all when it comes to herbs. The *Easy to See Herbs II* mod solves one of the biggest complaints about Henry's gardening adventure: it can be really hard to spot what you're looking for in the vanilla game. Especially when it comes to belladonna (one of the ingredients in the Savior Schnapps), some of the game's herbs just don't stand out among the grass, making finding them a brutal and boring hunt. This mod does a nice job of making herbs like mint and nettles pop without making them cartoonishly obvious.

HEAVY METALS

Speaking of stuffing your pockets with plants, you'll also be collecting a lot of other junk on your travels, like clothing, jewellery, armour, shields and weapons. Hauling your loot back and selling it can be a challenge due to a semi-realistic carry weight and the fact that merchants don't have bottomless pockets of coin. That's why two popular tweaks are the *Carry Weight* mod, which starts by doubling the amount you can carry and allows you to raise it to infinite levels, and a

mod called *Rich Merchants*, which means vendors can spend more on your haul. Carry more loot, sell more of it at once. You'll have Henry back on his feet in no time.

While you're out bashing bandits, sleeping in haystacks, and riding horses, you're going to wind up... how should I put this... smelling like complete ass. Being stinky in *KCDII* is a feature that means people might treat you worse if they get a whiff, and your stench can even give you away during stealth. That means Henry's gotta wash his clothes and take baths: a lot of them. The *Stay Clean for Longer* mod means you won't get quite as filth-covered quite as quickly, so you'll need to take fewer baths to stay clean.

Finally, since wearing a helmet with the visor down will black out some of your eyesight, there's a mod



THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF OTHER LITTLE TIME-SAVING MODS

called *No Helmet Vision* that removes that effect, making your life a lot easier, if less realistic.

It's worth noting that not everyone wants to make *KCDII* harder: there are plenty of modders making the RPG more immersive and challenging. The *Tougher Economy* mod cuts the sell value of equipment in half to prevent the same problem the original game had: Henry getting incredibly rich before he's halfway through his adventure.

There are also several mods that nerf your abilities for finding your way around in the world. They didn't have GPS in medieval times, so *Toggle Hide Compass* stops you from getting free directions just by glancing at your HUD. The *No Player Map Marker* mod removes the icon from your map that shows you exactly where you are. Another mod called *Scout Hardcore Mode* removes all objective markers, too, and stops the map from centring on your precise location. Now your map is just a regular old map and you can't tell which way you're going without looking at landmarks and road signs. Good luck, Henry! You're going to bloody need it mate. ■



SURVIVE ATOMFALL

Face the post-apocalyptic countryside. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

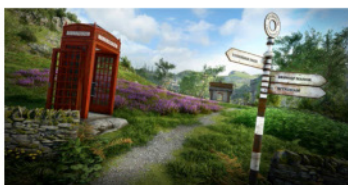
DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
A few hours

VITAL LINKS

Atomfall tips:
pcgamer.com/games/fps/atomfall-tips

Things to find first:
pcgamer.com/games/fps/atomfall-what-to-find-first



MAPPED OUT

1 Your first step in *Atomfall* should be puzzling out how the map functions. Many of the game's leads use coordinates to direct you and don't have waypoints. If in doubt, remember that E indicates the number on the bottom and top, while N means those on either side.



FOLLOW THE LEAD

2 Pursuing one of the game's leads isn't quite like your regular RPG quest. Since many of them are note-based, you can often hop into quests at different points of progression. If you find a note that doesn't seem to lead anywhere, that's why.



GRAB A GUN

3 You'll find a rusted Mark.VI Revolver in Bunker L7, on top of the bridge near where you emerge at the start, and it isn't too tricky to take down an outlaw and sneakily grab his. Though ugly, rusted weapons don't have much of a downside in *Atomfall*, so you can happily blast away.



LIGHT IT UP

4 While exploring gloomy bunkers and shadowy caves, you might find yourself longing for a light source. You can trade for a torch with Reg Stansfield in the Slate Mine Caves. If you're patient, you can also grab a torch from a corpse inside the Wyndham Village entrance.



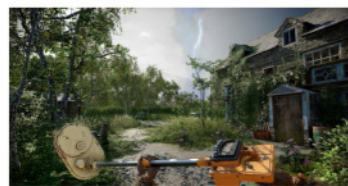
SKILL LEVEL

5 If you're running around bashing outlaws with your cricket bat, but wondering why you aren't levelling up; *Atomfall* has an item-based skill system. You'll need to find skill stimulants inside BARD crates and bunkers to level up.



CRAFTY DEVIL

6 Another way to supplement your meagre arsenal of bullets is to explore and find recipes to craft Molotovs, makeshift grenades, or poison and nail bombs. These throwables can be devastating, especially if you unlock the skills that improve them.



DETECTORIST

7 It's quite easy to find crafting materials or items in *Atomfall*, and if you grab a metal detector, you can track down even more in hidden caches. You can trade for one with Reg Stansfield, same as with the torch, or you can find one for free on an outlaw corpse.

UP AND ATOM *Trounce the quarantine zone's dark denizens*



2

UNFRIENDLY LOCALS

Outlaws camping in Slatten Dale, ferals infesting the Interchange, druids patrolling the Casterfell Woods, or Protocol guarding their Skethermoor Camp.

3

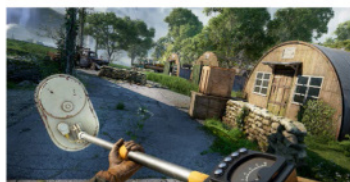
SECRETS OF THE ZONE

Those who explore and follow leads – despite local opposition – will find extra skill stimulants, manuals, and weapons in better condition.

1

THAT'S NOT CRICKET

Whether you prefer picking off foes with a gun, or whacking them around the head with a cricket bat, *Atomfall* has a number of weapons to try out.



CACHE IN

8 If you're wondering how to locate a hidden cache, your metal detector will buzz when one's nearby. Once it starts buzzing, take it out, and follow the red dots on its interface until they all start flashing. Now it's simply a case of unearthing it using the prompt.



STORAGE SOLUTIONS

9 Those looting everything in sight will quickly find their inventory fit to burst. When this happens, use the pneumatic tube system to store your spare items and weapons – you can find this stash in bunkers and at the entrances to the Interchange.



EXTERMINATOR

10 Though *Atomfall* doesn't have any fearsome mutated enemies besides ferals, it does have plenty of swarms. Rats and wasps have nests you can destroy at a distance, and you can always toss an explosive lure to attract and exterminate the others.



BOOTED

11 If you're still struggling with hunts, consider crafting and consuming items. Armorskins, Demon Drugs, Hardshell Powder and Demon Powder, all offer buffs to attack and defence. Wolfing down a few of these powerful consumables will help level the field.



NO SIGNAL

12 The final tool you'll need to fully explore *Atomfall* is the signal redirector. This experimental gizmo allows you to reroute power so you can use previously locked doors and devices. The easiest one to find is in the Skethermoor Prison security office.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMING

BEING SMOOTH IN
**VAMPIRE THE
MASQUERADE –
BLOODLINES**

PART 1

Becoming a high-society vampire. *By Ian Evenden*

Everything is dark, and I'm being asked questions. Someone is following me, what do I do? I'm caught by the spouse of someone I'm trying to sleep with, do I tell them I'm a distant cousin or hide and sneak away? There's an intruder in my house, do I fight them or shoot them? *Vampire the Masquerade – Bloodlines'* character creator offers you the choice to answer these questions instead of getting down to it in the traditional character creator, and my answers mean I end up in Clan Toreador. Among the artists, visionaries and members of high society I feel right at home.

More importantly, Toreadorians fit right in among mortals, which is important to me. I want my twilight existence to be as a smooth-talking master of the vampiric arts, not as a wretched sewer dweller existing on rats, too disgusting to step above ground. As such, I end up with one point in things like strength and stamina on my character sheet, and two in wits, appearance and manipulation. I have points in brawling and firearms, if I end up in a tight spot, but none in stealth. And with two points in celerity I'm quick too. I'm not going to hide, but I might make a hasty getaway. I have a humanity score of seven, which is average, but which I mustn't allow to fall lest I become bestial.

I'm playing *VTMB* with the unofficial patch installed, which brings a lot of quality-of-life improvements and a few surprising additions to a 20-year-old game that had the misfortune to be released on the same day as *Half-Life 2*, and which was notorious for its bugs at launch. Today, with patches and updates, it's mostly a smooth process and runs well even on integrated graphics. Its narrative design and writing are still some of the best out there, and its open-ended nature means you may never play it the same way twice.

THIS SUCKS

Cyprian Maggard awakes from restless dreams, and from the look of the pills, handcuffs and underwear scattered around the room he's had a very good time indeed. The twin pinpricks on his neck suggest trouble, however, and

the door is immediately kicked down. Cyprian and his new friend are hauled before a prince, and she is summarily beheaded for turning him into a vampire without permission. He's allowed to live, and is turned out into the streets to prove himself worthy.

"You're a monster now, make no mistake," says Jack, a useful guide Cyprian bumps into almost immediately, and who helps him survive an attack by a vampire faction known as The Sabbat, who throw bullets around with abandon. He exhorts the new recruit not to kill humans, at least not the innocent ones, and almost immediately after that he gets someone killed. There's a security guard

FROM THE LOOK OF THE PILLS, HANDCUFFS AND UNDERWEAR HE'S HAD A VERY GOOD TIME

covering in the basement from the Sabbat attack, and when he confronts Cyprian about what he's doing there, he persuades him to head back upstairs rather than get into a fight or have him call for help. He walks straight into a Sabbat vampire who kills him, and somehow it's Cyprian who's the bad guy. He even loses humanity. It's not a great start.

Still, pretty soon Cyprian is holed up in a horrific Santa Monica safe house, with pizza on the counter and blood in the fridge, where the world's clunkiest green-screen laptop sends him off on what sounds suspiciously like a quest. It's a complete dump, not the sort of thing Cyprian is used to at all, and certainly not what he was expecting from his new Clan Toreador lifestyle. There's a filthy double bed, but three toothbrushes in the bathroom, a situation which raises questions of its own, and he has two experience points that he can't spend, because the meanest upgrade on his character sheet costs three.

Heading outside, Cyprian begins doing something he never thought he'd do as a vampire: helping people. He gives the unhoused gentleman outside the safehouse a dollar, fetches painkillers for shady underworld contact Mercurio, who's been injured in a fight over some

explosives, and donates a bit of his own blood to help a young lady at the clinic, though he avoids telling her he's a vampire as this would be a *Masquerade* violation. All this do-gooding has raised his Humanity to 9, but he's low on blood. At the risk of sounding like Dick Ray-Tracing, it's time to take to the shadows. Cyprian heads through a parking garage, revolver in hand, to find out who roughed up Mercurio.

FORK IN THE ROAD

It turns out to be surfer dudes, living out by the beach with their boards propped up at the side of their house. They're heavily armed, there appears to be a meth lab in the house, and they have posted a guard outside... so it seems like a ripe time to try out some stealth kills. However, Cyprian

THE RULES

1. Don't kill innocents.
2. Don't fight: scheme and manipulate instead
3. Avoid losing humanity as much as possible.



This is the end of a great night out.

ends up battering the guard with a tyre iron, picking up a knife, and stabbing everyone else to death with the exception of one white-coated guy who's standing (or possibly floating) on top of some furniture. Cyprian shoots him several times. All this has drained his health, so he restores it with Blood Heal and heads off to find a poor unfortunate to top up his red reservoir. A lone cop wandering past supplies a feed, but he's left alive at the end of it.

All very exciting, but not very Clan Toreador. So Cyprian invokes one of his special PC gaming powers and reloads a save. This time, he approaches the surfers with his winning personality on full blast, and at first things seem to go OK. The buff, shirtless guard lets him through with only a little light seduction, and Cyprian sneaks around behind him to feed – there are no innocents in a combat zone, so he crumples to the ground dead. All the other surfers stand to attention with glowing halos around their heads rather than shooting or trying to knife him too – it's all going swimmingly until he enters the room where the explosives are stored, and the guy who was floating above the furniture in the previous battle attacks him. The ensuing fight leads all the other surviving surfers to rush in and attack too.

Cyprian has tried approaching the simple retrieval of some explosives two different ways, and ended up in a fight each time despite really, really wanting to charm his way out of these situations. He's also forgotten something about his character sheet, which is that he has points in unarmed combat and not melee weapons, so punching bad guys actually does twice the damage of knifing them. Bullets don't seem to hurt them too much either.

Feeling dejected, he takes the explosives back to Mercurio, who is being rather dramatic about having been stabbed in the kidneys and is lounging around on a couch and still complaining despite the fact Cyprian gave him

BELOW: What is the charge? Eating a meal? A succulent human meal?



VAMPIRE THE HAND GRENADE

The gaming machines of Bloodlines



TOWER PC

Apart from the fact it's not plugged in or connected to the monitor, this looks pretty tasty for 2004. Inside we might find a GeForce 6800 Ultra and an Athlon 64 3400+, ready for glorious 1024x768 graphics. And just look at that three-button mouse.



GAMES CONSOLE

Under the TV at the surfers' house sits this N64-like object. It's a bit primitive for 2004, as they should have a GameCube by then, but it's easy to imagine them playing *Mario Kart* or *Wave Race 64* in between getting stoned and cooking meth, though there are only two pads.



ARCADES

In a more modern release, these would be playable, but in *Bloodlines* they are silent monuments. If only Konami had published *VTMB*, then we could have had *Castlevania*, *Salamander*, and maybe *Dance Dance Revolution* too, to help restore humanity.

painkillers earlier. The next part of what Cyprian is starting to suspect is a quest chain involves going to a nightclub, The Asylum, where he imagines all kinds of smooth-talking debauchery will take place as he attempts to call off a vendetta with Bertram Tung, a local Nosferatu.

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

It starts well enough, with Cyprian meeting a delightful young lady the moment he steps through the door, who he recognises from the game's box art. She's somewhat flirty, though Cyprian is suspicious that she might not be entirely stable. Once she heads off upstairs, Cyprian encounters another friendly clubber – this is turning into a really good night – who is rather receptive to his charms and gives up her blood willingly. Unfortunately, Cyprian is a bumbling fool who's still new to this, so he kills her. Oopsie. Luckily, this doesn't seem to count as a murder or a breach of the Masquerade thanks to the vampiric nature of the club, but he loses a humanity point nonetheless.

Cyprian has read that dancing in a nightclub will restore your humanity, but as it's still at 8, one above where he started, he decides to forget about it for now, and goes upstairs to chat with the owner on behalf of Mercurio. The businesslike Therese warns him about her sister, the convivial woman he met when he first entered, and then asks him to go ghost-hunting, and collect an artefact that will end the haunting of a local hotel. Which sounds like fun, but does mean going down to the sewers, and Cyprian is worried his nice red outfit might get dirty.

Still, Cyprian is a helpful vampire, so off he goes to the nearest sewer entrance. There must be more such benevolent types around Santa Monica, as someone has put maps up to assist in finding your way beneath the streets. Cyprian soon gets to the



IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE A NORMAL HUMAN TURN TAIL, BUT NOT BRAVE CYPRIAN

Ocean House Hotel, which appears to be undergoing some renovations, and a quick poke around in a cabin reveals the door key. That's when spooky things start happening: a Hellcat digger starts up, and drives itself into the corner of the cabin without a driver anywhere in sight. On the steps of the hotel, a lightbulb blows next to the door as Cyprian approaches. When he enters, the chandelier falls down, a thunderstorm begins and a ghostly figure is briefly glimpsed in one of the wings. She turns up again later, pointing out the way forward, which goes to show ghosts can be as helpful as vampires. On the downside, things tend to explode painfully when Cyprian gets close to them. It's enough to make a normal human turn tail, but not brave Cyprian, who has recharging health.

Heading up the stairs, he falls through a hole into the basement, which seems to have been designed with jump scares in mind. Eventually he manages to restart the boiler and enter a lift – which laughs evilly at him – and return to the upper floor.

There's some dreadfully unsubtle environmental storytelling going on,

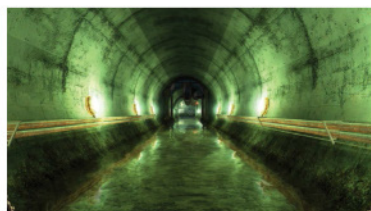
with a 'Get Out' message scrawled on a bedroom wall, and a children's drawing showing a happy family with a demonic father. It's not *Dead Space*-level, but the hotel, which is so influenced by *The Shining* that it even contains tricycles, certainly knows how to create a foreboding atmosphere.

What follows is a tightly scripted haunted house level mixed with first-person jumping and an absolutely wild scene set in a kitchen that sees Cyprian bombarded with pots and pans. It drives him forward down a prescribed route rather than letting him explore too widely, yet still manages to get him lost. Despite this it's a fantastic tale within a tale, a story about a gruesome murder teased out by the newspaper headlines you uncover as you creep around. Eventually Cyprian narrowly avoids a falling lift and makes it to the top floor before being whisked back

in time to the hotel's heyday, the broken furniture and rotted floors restored to their former glory, collecting a locket from the table to lay the ghost to rest.

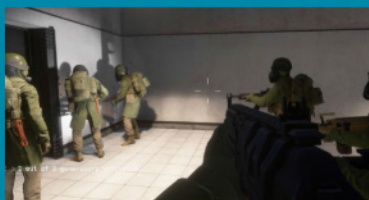
Eventually, Cyprian leaves the hotel to find a huge moon hanging in the night sky, and looks up just in time to see a passenger jet pass across it. Heading back through the sewers to The Asylum with the locket in hand, he wonders if his next dealings with Jeanette and her sister will require more in the way of silver-tongued manipulation, or just a bit more punching goons. Anything is possible in the twilight afterlife of Santa Monica. ■

ABOVE: The best place in town for the latest trance anthems, I'm sure.

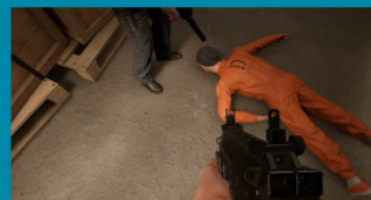


SCP SECRET LAB'S PROXIMITY CHAT

The art of deception. *By Elie Gould*



RIGHT: The only D-boy we found the entire game.



There's nothing quite like relying on the kindness of strangers when you're in a confusing online co-op horror game like *SCP: Secret Laboratory*. Each round sees you get dropped into a different role with varying objectives and placed into a randomly generated map right before a catastrophic event lets all the eldritch monsters out of their pens and into the facility; oh, and you're also alongside up to 25 other players who want you dead.

It may seem like an impossible task to navigate all of that, but *SCP: Secret Lab* has an ace up its sleeve: proximity chat. Every so often, you find a good soul who's willing to help you no questions asked, but most of the time, I find myself begging for my life with a Scientist player who's gone power mad after finding a lone pistol in a locker. Being able to talk to your fellow players completely changes the horror experience.

I'M ALL EARS

Negotiating is a surprisingly big part of *SCP: Secret Lab*. It's a skill that pays to get good at, especially if you find yourself spawned in as a Class-D Personnel, the runt of the litter. Class-D Personnel are prisoners kept in the facility to work as lab rats. Scientists, Facility Guards and the Mobile Task Force that is sent in to protect humans against the SCP monsters all hate Class-D Personnel and won't hesitate to kill them. Even players who are assigned to the Chaos Insurgency, an armed force that is meant to help Class-D Personnel escape the facility will kill

NEED TO KNOW

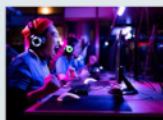
RELEASE
December 29, 2017

DEVELOPER
Northwood Studios

PUBLISHER
Northwood Studios

LINK
scpslgame.com

MIXED BUNCH *The four kinds of SCP players*



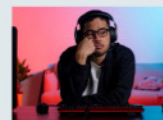
THE SCREAMER

You'll always be able to tell where this player is because they will just never stop wailing from the absolute top of their lungs.



THE DJ

Is always blasting music through their mic, but no one really minds because Party In The USA is the perfect music for fighting monsters.



THE STRATEGIST

A perpetual yapper, this player will not go out without a fight or, at the very least, a half-decent plan that'll probably get everyone killed.



THE SILENT TYPE

You'll never know what they're thinking, but a slow shake of the head when you lock them in a containment room still hurts.

them most of the time. It may just be a running joke among the community, but it's also a good example of how close a community can get when they're all talking.

You don't just have to negotiate with other humans in *SCP: Secret Lab*, players can also spawn in as one of the SCPs that roam the facility killing everyone in their wake. There are seven playable monsters, and some are easier to talk to than others. The Crying man or Peanut will snap your neck before you even know

all any humble Class-D can hope for in *SCP: Secret Lab*.

DUBSTEP HORROR

I've been hunted down by an MTF soldier who was playing The One That Got Away by Katy Perry or chased by a bloody monster, and the only way I could tell it was zoning in on my hiding place was because I could hear Levels by Avicii get louder as it roamed the hallways.

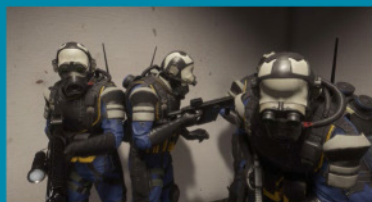
It seems like a rather silly feature for a horror game, but the fact that *SCP: Secret Lab* players can get so creative with proximity chat is one of the reasons why I've never gotten tired of jumping back into this game. You never really know what you'll have to face up against.

Proximity chat completely transforms *SCP: Secret Lab* from a terrifying and confusing game into one that is just a little less so but now also has the capability to be hilarious at the drop of a hat. Like most co-op horror games, the company you play with can make or break your experience with the game. In the case of *SCP: Secret Lab*, hearing the wails from your allies, the silly little fights between different classes, and every so often pop music echoing around the halls of the derelict facility is definitely the icing on the cake for me. ■

CLASS-D PERSONNEL ARE PRISONERS IN THE FACILITY TO WORKING AS LAB RATS

they're behind you, but the Plague Doctor and Dog are better listeners.

One time when the Dog had cornered me after killing the group of Class-Ds I had been trying to escape with I decided to do what I do best and rid myself of all morals. I immediately promised to sell all the other Class-Ds out and even offered to switch sides and become a zombie so I could help them hunt down the rest of the survivors and win the round. It worked. I managed to survive and win the round, which is



LEFT: Facility Guards rummaging through dangerous scientific equipment, natch.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Peering at the screen in a way
unbecoming of a serious journalist



Y'know, for medium settings this doesn't look at all bad.

CRYSIS

Notorious for melting GPUs, it needed 18 years to mellow. *By Ian Evenden*

Crysis became a meme for its high graphics requirements, but it's almost 20 years old – surely modern systems have advanced far enough to do it justice? Well... kinda.

I'm reinstalling plain old *Crysis* here, not *Crysis Remastered* or the version from the *Crysis Trilogy* set, which means I'm not benefitting from any quality of life improvements that came with the newer releases. It's the standard version you get from Steam, and it won't run on my gaming PC. That's right, a PC with an RTX 3080 in it is unable to run *Crysis*. Sadly for the meme-sters, it's probably a software or driver issue rather than a lack of rendering power, it just stops dead and resets back to the Steam library page instead of attempting to render a slideshow. None of the

solutions I unearth from the internet work, so I move to my backup PC.

This is a mini-PC that has a Core i9-13900h in it, and a useful 32GB of RAM, but no discrete GPU. The recommended graphics card for *Crysis* is a GeForce 8800 GTS, a card from 2007's Tesla generation that can have as much as 640MB of VRAM but more usually came in a 512MB configuration with a 256-bit bus. This gives it a peak performance of around 416 GFLOPS, while the integrated Iris Xe GPU in the i9 returns 1.7 TFLOPS. Theoretically, of course. For comparison, the RTX 3080 that's frustratingly unable to play *Crysis* is capable of almost 30 TFLOPS.

This looks good for *Crysis* on integrated graphics, but there's a further hitch. My mini-PC is hooked up to a 4K monitor, and the game is unable to run in fullscreen at

anything less than 4K resolution. Lower settings work, but run in a window that's so small I'm left peering at the screen in a way unbecoming of a serious journalist. Ticking the 'full screen' option in the game's settings doesn't solve the problem, and after some experimentation with the game's performance analyser and the Game Bar's frame counter, I'm left with medium settings.

FEAR OF MISSING OUT

The GeForce 8800 GTS couldn't output 4K, topping out at 2560x1600 if you used dual-link DVI, so I'm already ahead of gamers from 2007, and I'm amused by the Core 2 Extreme logo that appears on startup, wondering how gamers from that era would respond to the Raptor Lake chip's 24 cores.

The game runs, but medium settings have never sat well with me, and I'm left with the distinct feeling that I'm missing something. >>

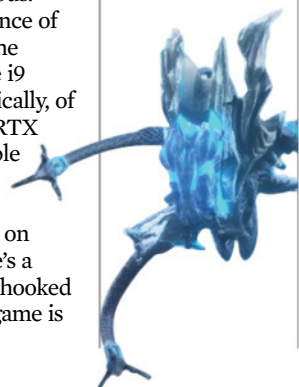
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2007

DEVELOPER
Crytek

PUBLISHER
EA

LINK
[s.team/a/17300](https://steam/a/17300)





The game's volumetric lighting looks great, but the beach scenes are the best looking.



Such is the life of a PC gamer, however. While consoles, with their fixed platforms that only update every five years or so, only inspire a longing for new hardware once every cycle, for PC players it's a permanent thing, and games like *Crysis* really don't help. This thing must have been responsible for more graphics card upgrades than just about any other piece of software. Incidentally, if anyone reading this has managed to achieve upgrade impulse control, perhaps through a combination of

transcendental meditation and mind-bending drugs, please write in and let the entire hardware department know.

So, with high-res but medium quality settings and looking very much like an Xbox 360 game, *Crysis* is off and running. It's really not all that bad, with plenty of vegetation and the light gleaming off the palm trees, but there's a distinctly primitive look to everything. The one concession to modernity it manages is that Windows 11's Auto-HDR

mode kicks in, though I'm not completely sure how much good it's doing. What's remarkable, though, is how modern it feels despite wanting nothing to do with the USB game controller I have plugged in.

JUNGLE IS MASSIVE

I've migrated away from keyboard controls in the past years, the lure of yet another piece of hardware to upgrade just too much to resist, so going back to WASD and mouse aiming immediately shows how much my skills have degraded and how bad I've become at shooting when my hand's not being held by auto-aim. To begin with, I can't hit anything, spraying bullets around with abandon in a way that does not suit the highly trained recon soldier I'm meant to be playing as.

On the other side of the conflict, the North Korean troops I'm encountering are deadly accurate, even when firing from a moving boat at a figure crouched behind a rock hundreds of metres away. Perhaps turning off the flashlight attached to my rifle will make me less visible.

Crysis' apparent modernity makes sense when you stop thinking about it as an antique, which is tempting to do about a game from this era of the

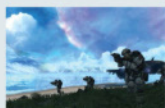
ANATOMY OF A CRYSIS

Bits of games you'll recognise after going back to 2007



FAR CRY

Well of course, they're from the same developer. Jungles, beach scenes, full-auto gunfire, soldiers giving way to weird sci-fi enemies. It's all here, just without any Hawaiian shirts.



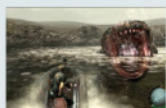
HALO

Thanks to the way they call out your location (in English, though ingeniously on higher difficulties this switches to Korean) and use grenades, the soldiers can feel like you're fighting Elites.



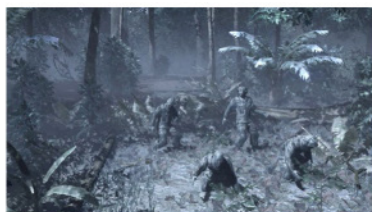
GHOST RECON

The sneaky Clancy game launched in 2001, and its forested setting, along with the way it expects you to sneak up on groups of enemies before taking them out, has echoes in *Crysis*.



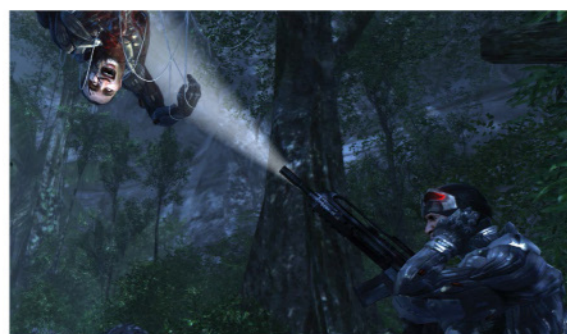
RESIDENT EVIL 4

The North Korean soldiers like to leave outboard motors laying around their encampments, which immediately reminded me of *Resi* 4's third chapter, which opens with a lovely boat ride...



FAR RIGHT: Dammit Jester, turn off your light – do you want to be spotted?

LEFT: Enemies always seem to know where you are – there's no getting away, even in a tank.



recent past. It's from 2007, 11 years after *Quake 2*, six years after *Halo*, three-and-a-half after *Far Cry*, and three years after *Half-Life 2*. The game is old, but not that old. We're not configuring DOSbox here.

Off I go again, into the jungle, and I have a settings breakthrough following a restart. Something has changed, I'm not sure what, and the game is now happy to run in 1080p fullscreen as long as I don't Alt+Tab out – doing this also disables the game's sound, so I quickly learn to avoid it. This means I can increase the quality settings to very high and still get 60fps, which is great, but now there's screen tearing all over the place. Enabling V-sync is the traditional way to deal with this, but doing that locks the framerate at 24fps. Which might be cinematic, but isn't why I'm here.

I decide that tearing is the lesser of all the evils, and eventually I compromise on 1080p, very high settings and some anti-aliasing, which results in a framerate in the 40s and 50s if you can deal with the tearing, which mostly happens when I whirl the camera around or fall down dead. Which I do a lot. There's also a heck of a lot of pop-in, boulders and trees visibly teleporting

I CAN INCREASE THE QUALITY SETTINGS TO VERY HIGH AND STILL GET 60FPS

into position well within the field of view if you're faced with one of its few inland vistas (the sea and shoreline never seem to have this issue) which is probably why the game tries to keep things close as much as it can.

HIDE AND SEEK

This is an interesting lesson in how *Crysis* wants to be played. The North Korean soldiers, not to mention the chilly, squiddy beasts I'll be fighting later on, are tough. And while the game wants you to engage them up close, there's nothing to be gained from charging straight at them like I'm playing *Doom* even though I quickly pick up a shotgun. Instead, it casts you as a hunter. You're effortlessly superior to your foes, at least to begin with, but there are many more of them. This means you have to take the role of a predator, use your suit abilities, cloak yourself, pop out and take aimed, close-range shots, make sure your silencer is

equipped, flush with grenades (something the enemy troops are adept at) and try at all costs to avoid getting drawn into a stand-up fire fight with the enemy in cover, because they'll win.

You're constantly forced to reevaluate your tactics, and the early game cries out for a long-ranged weapon with a proper sight so you can pick off the grunts from afar, something you're just not given. They appear intensely aware of their surroundings, responding to noise and the smallest sight of a nanosuit-clad American. Enter an area cloaked, however, and they exhibit much more relaxed behaviour – but the cloak never lasts long enough, and once you start shooting it's gone.

Reinstalling *Crysis* has taught me a lot about how I play and perceive games today, and how that has changed from the way things were when I was 18 years younger. Then, I was happy to press on through restarts and low quality settings, with hardware I desperately wanted to be better than it really was.

Crysis remains immensely playable today, even on integrated graphics, but you're probably better off with the remastered edition. ■



TYLER WILDE



Sometimes I launch a game and by the time it finishes compiling shaders I don't feel like playing it any more. Maybe our attention spans really are shot?



MAKE FUNGUS

AVOWED

avowed.obsidian.net

→ The first RPG I've played that lets me carefully adjust the shape and colour of my character's eyes and then decide to entirely cover them with mushrooms. Combat's fun, and it's prettier than I expected even on my slightly aged PC – though all my character's seeing is fungus.

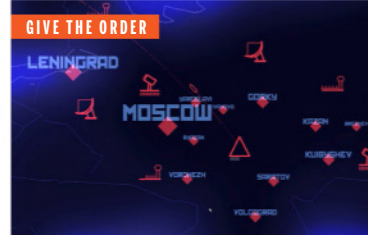


DEFEAT MUSIC

THUMPER

thumpergame.com

→ I've recently been listening to a lot of Emptyset, an experimental band whose songs sound like war anthems composed by modems. It's great stuff, and led me to reinstall this fantastic 2016 rhythm game that we called a "total assault on your ears, eyes and reflexes".

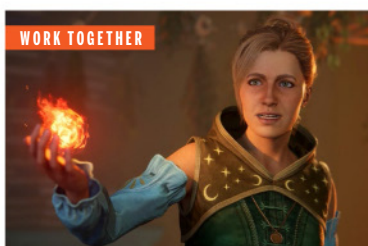


GIVE THE ORDER

DEFCON

introversion.co.uk

→ This nuclear war sim will not relieve anxiety about the state of the world, but it's a great game, especially if you can get friends to play with you. It's also a rare game whose point is built into its design, "In nuclear Armageddon, everybody loses. You just have to lose the least."



WORK TOGETHER

SPLIT FICTION

hazelight.se

→ The latest co-op adventure from the *It Takes Two* developer. I've only played a few levels, and my co-op partner was game director Josef Fares himself – yours may not be as infectiously energetic – but I thought its relentless variety was great. I turned into a pig and rode a dragon.



RISE UP

SLAY THE SPIRE

megacrit.com

→ Roguelike deckbuilders are in vogue, so there are tons of new ones to try, but I feel drawn back to the familiar whimsy of the great *Slay the Spire*. Perhaps it's just excitement for *Slay the Spire 2*. If you dig *Balatro* and haven't played this, fix that.

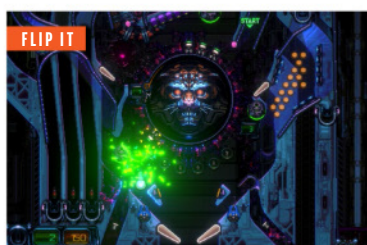


AUTOMATE IT

FACTORIO

factorio.com

→ If artificial intelligence really takes all our jobs, at least we'll have more time to play automation games (until the power's switched off, at least). I've come to *Factorio* late, inspired by its big new space expansion, and it's just as satisfying as you've heard.

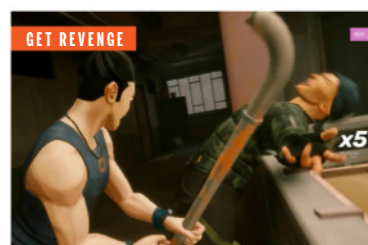


FLIP IT

XENOTILT

xenotilt.com

→ I'll give *Caves of Qud* a proper go sometime soon I really promise I will, but I haven't been in the mood for thinky stuff of late. If I'm seeing words on the screen, they better say stuff like, "Multiball madness!" This "hostile pinball action" game does the trick.



GET REVENGE

SIFU

sifugame.com

→ One of my favourite martial arts games. I thought of it recently because it appeared in that Secret Level show. The episode's fine, but pretty much just looked like someone playing the game. That's not very satisfying when you can go play it yourself, so do that.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

Following Dick Ray-Tracing's continued disappearance, with him missing, presumed dead, I, police inspector A Vance, present the following case file that was found in Ray-Tracing's last recorded location, his room at the Engländer Hof inn in Meiringen, Switzerland.



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FINAL PWN**

PART 1

The videogame industry has changed. My time has ended. The platform war is over. But there's one more thing I must do. One last obligation I must act upon for the good of all PC gamers. I must erase the leadership of the Console Gamer Collective before they ruin gaming forever. I must wipe the CGC from the face of the Earth. This is my final mission...

"Where are they!" I bellowed, while holding my revolver to the forehead of the CGC assassin, his shirt emblazoned with a #liveservice4life slogan. "I'll never talk, Ray-Tracing!" he sneered before spitting on my trenchcoat. I unloaded a bullet from the revolver into his right leg, causing the goon to let slip a guttural scream. "Where are they!" I repeated, grabbing the thug by his collar. "Look, I don't know nuttin', OK, I was bluffing!" he hurled back between cries. "Oh my god my leg, you freaking psycho! Just you wait until..." I fired into his left leg, forcing him to crumple to the floor screaming. "Talk or you die," I countered, returning the barrel of the gun to the thug's forehead. "OK, OK, when you were dead I was supposed to report to my CGC contact in Canterbury Cathedral tomorrow morning at 04.51am. The meeting place is the cathedral's altar. That's all I know I swear!" I believed him, so pulled the trigger.

I travelled to Canterbury undercover dressed as an Italian priest in order to avoid more run-ins with CGC assassins, and as I stepped off the train into a pea-souper of a night, a nearby radio was playing Ave Maria. Moving swiftly through the dark streets of the city I gained access to the cathedral, slipping in by distracting the nightwatchman by throwing a copy of PC Gamer magazine onto the floor in front of him. Irresistible reading. Entering the cathedral's nave, I was met with a horrific sight, though. It was game publisher CEO Ron Stickyfellow, contactless payment machine in hand, walking between rows of console gamers who, every time they ran out of ammo in the live service FPS game they were playing, mindlessly held out their bank card to buy more bullets.

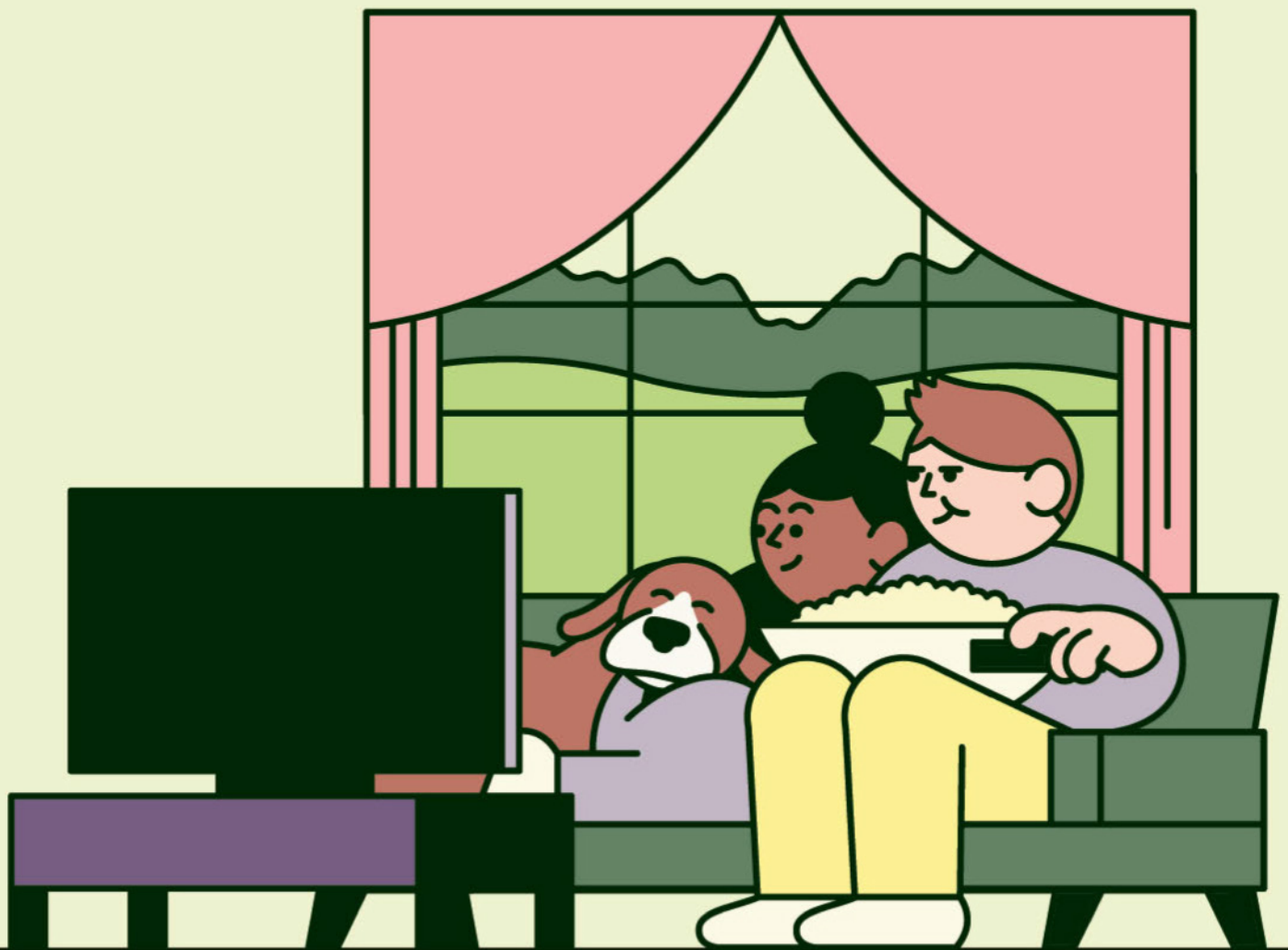
Slowly turning to me, a grin across his face, Stickyfellow said, "Welcome to the future of gaming, Ray-Tracing. Already the console gamers have slavishly bent to our will, and PC gamers will be next." My hand hovered over my revolver's holster, ready to draw. "This is sick, Stickyfellow! Sick!" I shouted into the cavernous, echoing hall. Stickyfellow then let out a guttural belly laugh. "Not as sick as you're going to be when my faithful deal with you, Dick." And, holding his arms outstretched as up to heaven, Stickyfellow then commanded, "Brothers! Bring me Ray-Tracing's head!"

TO BE CONTINUED...

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